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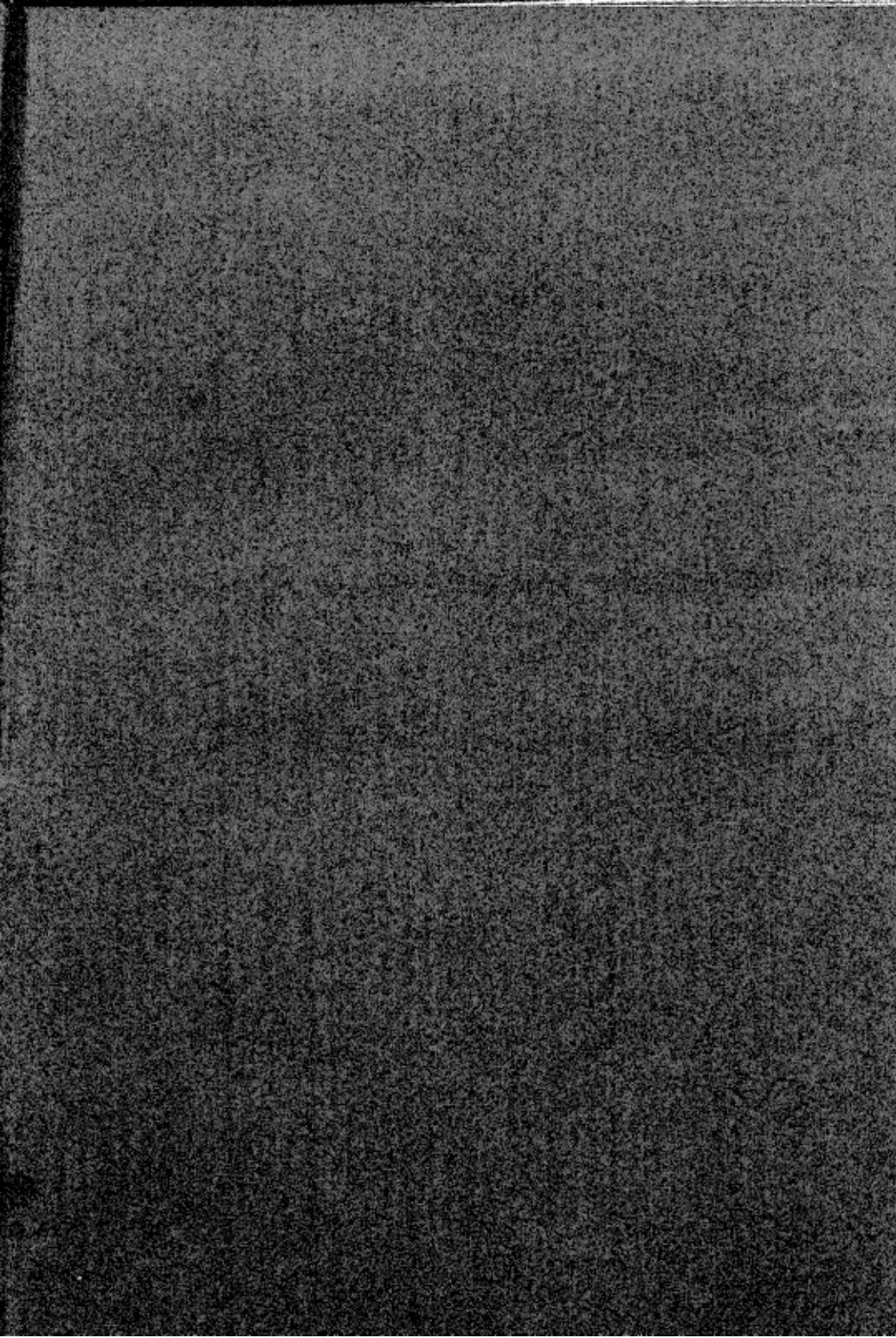
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When a place becomes a person

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When a place becomes a person

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ANEES JUNG

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FOREWORD

'India is as multitudinous as the sands of the sea,' wrote an English woman who had spent the best part of twenty years of her life in the country, and boasted that she knew India and Indians better than any European of her generation. Flora Anne Steele (1847-1929) whose novels and histories of India were avidly read by Victorians, found India 'Stagnant! featureless! A mere waste of waters without form or void.' Much of her trouble in understanding India and her people arose from the fact that she, like most other foreigners, started with an assumption that they were going to a topsy-turvy world and 'the difference between a brown and white skin was the outward sign of the vast difference between sentiment and sheet passion.' Whatever she meant by that generalisation, Mrs Steele admitted her failure to come to terms with the country through the mouth of one of her characters who left India in disgust: 'I have been made a fool of all through by these devilish people, and the sooner I get away the better . . . I shall be glad to leave this land of disappointment and regrets.' And then in her own parting words, 'India, as I looked back on Bombay from the deck of the ship that was bearing me away from all personal touch in the future of the country, appeared to me temple-crowned, mosque-crowned, a blue mist enveloping

both, and hiding alike the factories, the hovels, the offices, palaces and the millionaire mansions. All these things seemed to merge in that blue mist. Even the distant hills were lost in it. So India looked homogenous and so looked a lie. For India is as multitudinous as the sands of the sea.'

Flora Anne Steele was not alone in her bewilderment. Others of her race, far more friendly and perceptive than she, admitted to the same difficulty. E.M. Forster in his celebrated *A Passage to India* wrote: 'Nothing in India is identifiable. The mere asking of a question causes it to disappear or to merge in something else. India is the country—fields, fields, then hills, jungle, hills and more fields. The branch line stops, the road is only practicable for cars to a point, the bullock-carts lumber down the side tracks, paths fray out into the cultivation, and disappear near a splash of red paint. How can the mind take hold of such a country?' Forster summed up his frustration in one memorable sentence, 'Nothing embraces the whole of India, nothing, nothing.'

How then should one set about knowing a sprawling, continent-sized country of 600 million people of diverse races, religions, civilisations, ways of living, thinking and non-thinking?

Hitherto, most people have relied on foreigners who measured everything they saw in India with analogous phenomena in the countries they came from. Few had the time to learn Indian languages, study the Indian ethos with sympathy and cultivate friendship with its peoples to get close to the truth. The process has to be reversed. India has to be seen through the eyes of an Indian, an Indian who knows his country as well as the countries to which he tries to interpret it. He must first know his own language and then master those in which he means to convey all he knows. Few Indians are qualified to undertake this assignment. One amongst them is Anees Jung—the child of India, daughter of a Muslim aristocrat, educated in Indian, British and American universities—and above all gifted with an observant eye and a rare ability to organise what she has

Foreword

observed and convey it in felicitous prose. It is not surprising that, though still in her twenties, she has written for some of the most prestigious journals of America (*The New York Times* included), Britain, Canada and particularly all the national newspapers of India. Her series in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* was a resounding success. This collection of essays will prove most invaluable to those who wish to learn about India and her people.

KHUSHWANT SINGH
Editor
Illustrated Weekly of India

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INTRODUCTION



For my part I travel not to go anywhere but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move, to feel the needs and hitches of our life more nearly, to come down off the featherbed of civilisation and find the globe granite underfoot and strewn with cutting flints.

Robert Louis Stevenson

Growing up in a house with high white walls I never went anywhere. All that I knew of the world was the city of Hyderabad and that in those days meant the Public Gardens, the Char Minar, the Tank Bund and a hotel called Viccajee's which sold the best vanilla ice-cream in town. When I first left that house, it was to go to a small place called Ann Arbor in the state of Michigan, USA. It is lake country, it is very cold and there is a large university there, they told me. So I travelled to that place with silk quilts and flannel pyjamas, with souvenir books of my city, family albums and three heavy steel trunks full of clothes. My first train ride was to Bombay with the family. With them I went up the long swaying gangway into a steamer called *Straithard*. As the ship sounded its haunting toot they went away and I was alone. I saw them below—my sisters were weeping, my parents were waving coloured handkerchiefs. There was a lump in my throat. I held on to my

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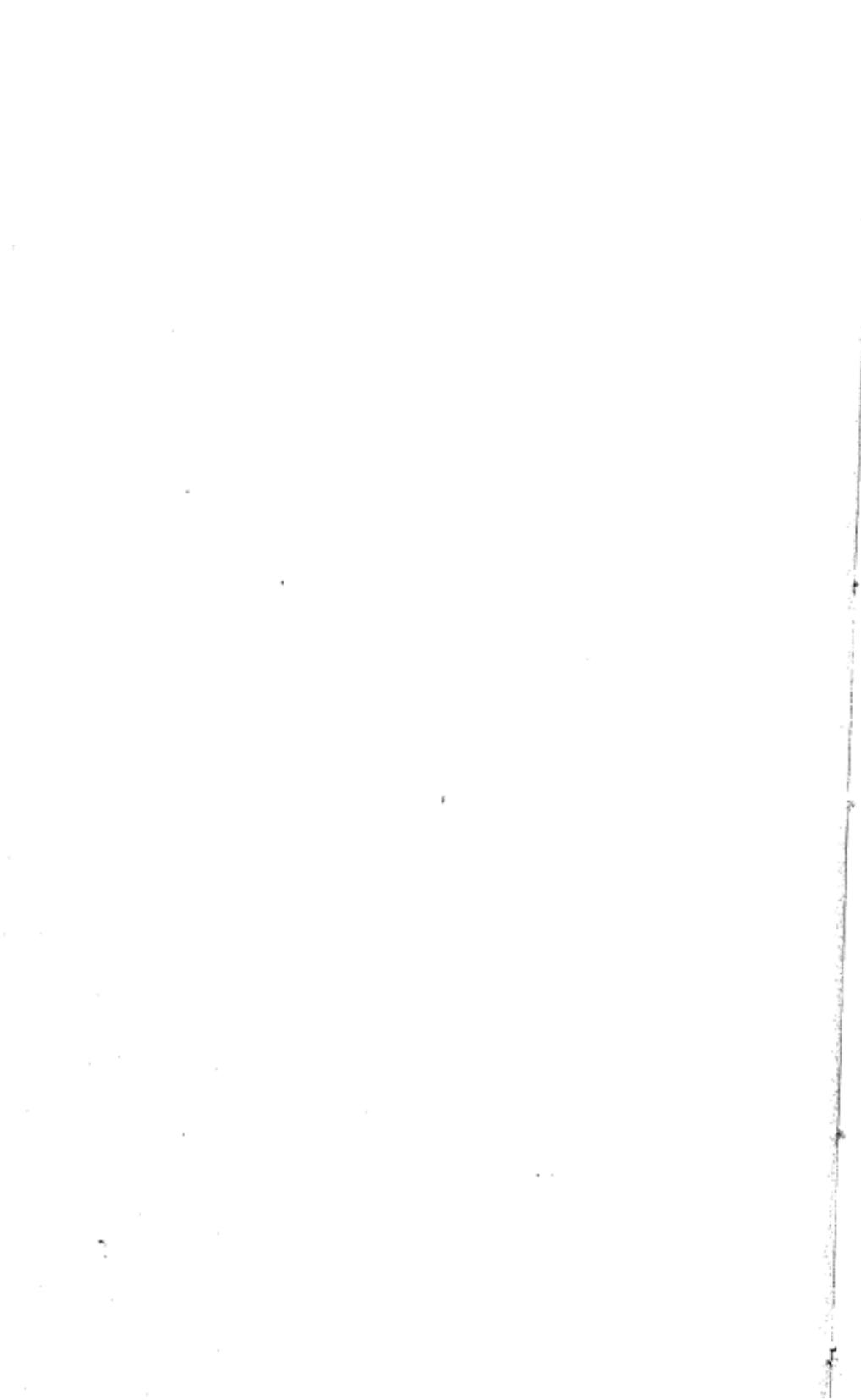
bag (which I was carrying for the first time) with one hand and waved weakly to them with the other. The boat moved away. They became specks in the distance. The sea became larger and larger and so did the world.

As everyone settled down on the red and green deck-chairs I looked around for someone like me. There was no one from Hyderabad in the boat. I met a doctor from Delhi, a drama student from Bombay, a lady lecturer from Calcutta and many others from towns whose names to me had just been names. There were also people from Canberra going to London. I knew of Canberra from my school geography but I never knew that the people who initially seemed so different were, in so many ways, like me. When the boat docked in Southampton and everyone went away I was alone again—but this time not as frightened as I was when I had seen the family disappearing in the distance. London was familiar—images of Hardy and Dickens, the pubs, the parks, the old Drury Lane Theatre and Shaw's *Pygmalion*. My English lessons were coming in handy. When I sailed again on the seven seas across the Atlantic the waves were turbulent and the sky grey. After five days we saw, through a dull drizzle, the Statue of Liberty rising out of the sea—huge, awesome but friendly. At the New York harbour there were two people to meet me. I had never known of them. They knew of me from a campus bulletin. They had always wanted an Indian student in the family and had picked my name. They were not from New York. I was happy and amazed to realise that people drove miles and miles to meet a person whom they had neither seen nor known. New York seemed smaller when I walked around with them. And has continued to be so during all my visits. The people I met here have lent their own dimensions to this vast, forbidding city.

Those were years of discovery. Going places then meant encountering people, exploring new worlds and, with them, exploring one's own. There was no one to hold my hand then. I have returned home. The house with the high white

walls has been painted pink. Outside its walls roars a larger, noisier city. Viccajee's has closed down. Tank Bund gleams with large coloured hoardings. No car rides on Sundays, no visits to the zoo. I walk along the city streets alone and unescorted; peep into places where women never went. In cells of rooms behind Char Minar I see young boys beating small pieces of silver. They beat with a rhythmic monotony turning a piece of metal into shimmering silver that they call *waraq*. The street resounds with the music of their beat. The silver *waraq* that I had seen and eaten all my life now acquires a greater value. Down the street I run into two women hidden behind black burqas. They look at me grimly, refuse to talk. They do not recognise me. I am an outsider for them—probably a memsahib from another world. When I begin to speak in the local dialect, they smile, twitter and go away. I am happy to have forged a contact.

In time, differences diminish. For I know these people—dark, lissome creatures, men and women, young and old who all call me 'Amma'. Their manner is familiar. Returning to them is like returning to my roots—and then on to see what the bigger, wider world of my country is all about.



You can come home again



Shangri-la is a large, beautiful house on the top of a hill. I have returned to it after several years. Its white paint has peeled off and it has been repainted pink. The bougainvilleas are as bright and profuse as they used to be. I sit on one of the round terraces and look out rather self-consciously at the city—where I was born, where I grew up and where I learnt to be whatever was to mark me a 'Hyderabadi'! In the distance lies the grey-blue familiar tank and the Tank Bund where, as children, we were taken for a car ride on Sundays. Beyond is the white minaret of a mosque amid a clump of old trees—quietly assuring me of a heritage of which I am a part, a heritage that still exists.

I shut my eyes, and then peer again. Is it as real as it used to be? I ask myself. I move to another terrace. Just below the stone wall I see a group of mud huts and brick huts, some thatched, others with tin roofs. I do not know who lives in them. They are 'poor people,' a little girl tells me as she bounces a ball on the terrace. But they must have names, I tell myself. I sit up and now see them. They are men in dhotis and shirts; women in blue, green and rose-pink saris. The children are playing hide and seek. One of them is running behind another throwing stones; another with a bare bottom is treading a mud wall while a number of others are just roaming listlessly in the mud alleys. For the first time I see them—the people of my city. I had never noticed them before. I want to go down and meet them. But the sun has set. The city in the distance

When a place becomes a person

shimmers. There are no lights in the huts. If not for the shrieks and shouts of the children I would not have known that life existed beyond the stone wall.

The Shangri-la I once knew is not the same. I feel uneasy. There is about things past, a quality of infinitude, a world that has lapsed, a time that is no more. An old servant with glazed eyes brings tea in gold-rimmed china cups. I offer him a cup. He stares at me, mutters something in the negative and withdraws. I have upset his sense of balance, for things like this do not happen in Shangri-la. At night, lying in bed, I hear the pigeons coo in the ventilators. I think of the children playing in the dark alleys, the servant who refused the gold-rimmed cup of tea and of Peggy, a big black lady who used to do the cleaning every Thursday when I lived with another friend in a small townhouse in Washington. She would come in at eight, fix coffee for me and for her in identical mugs, sit with me at the kitchen table and chatter away—about her boyfriend who worked around Dupont Circle, about the new television set she had acquired and about her plans to visit Atlantic City during her next summer vacation. She would laugh loudly as she talked and would sing in a soprano voice while she ironed the clothes. Peggy seems unreal while I now sleep in Shangri-la. Outside on the verandah, snores the servant with the lived-in face. Have I acquired other visions or is it the hour of night, the haze, the sleep...

Yet, when Air India's 707 spanned the Atlantic and circled above Bombay's Santa Cruz airport, I looked down at the hot green and blazing ochres below and wondered if I would belong here again. Have I become unaccustomed to the Indian tone and forgotten my Indian instincts? I had been several years in the U.S., perhaps a fourth of my life. I had studied, worked and travelled. I had done most of the things I wanted to do. People had said that I had become westernised and would find the old life intolerable. Most of them had predicted that I would return to the U.S. within a few months. My emotions were mingled. There was a sense of excitement

coupled with a gnawing fear as I descended on the hot air strip. I forgot everything for a moment when I recognised the familiar faces of my family in the crowd, waving furiously at me. It was like old times again. They had not changed and even though I had, it did not seem to matter to me or to them. But the things around us had changed. Hyderabad and the life we knew was now a thing of the past. I returned to a new city, a new home and a country that seized me with its new life. The Indians around me were no more a nameless mass, a mere backdrop to a miniature world I had hitherto known. Though they were all different, yet they seemed so alike. I saw them singly, found an echo in each of them.

It seemed bewildering at first—the ugliness of poverty on the streets, the endless time spent in getting anything done and the nagging odds against discipline, efficiency and day-to-day living. I had forgotten that peeled skins of fruit and garbage paper can be thrown onto a city street without a pang. I had forgotten that there were so many stars in the sky and that beaches can be stretches of sand, pebbles and palms. And I had forgotten the feeling of living around so many people. But with time, things sorted out. I caught myself throwing a banana skin on a boulevard. I sat at home and quietly accepted the idea of being served by servants and I got used to haggling with people—in shops, at ticket offices, in trains, cinemas, offices, everywhere. It all seemed in place for I was home again. If I was to live here and survive, I had to fall in line. And I did not fight it. Though dormant for a long while, it was all familiar. India was still a part of my being.

There was so much sorrow and struggle here, it seemed to me—a great land locked in mortal combat with the power and weakness of time and age. Just because of this struggle, how real and solid and eternal the cycle of life seemed around me. There was my mother, serene, poised, and complete in her womanhood. There were my sisters and brothers intensely involved with my happiness. Distant was the concept of working, earning and living for oneself. Joys and sorrows

When a place becomes a person

were shared here and though alone, one was never lonely. My life was not my own—it had a larger relevance, to my family, to my friends, and to a country which was not on the outside but was a part of me. I was drawn to my family. To return to them, which I did, I returned to myself, to the calm centre of the land and its life, quietly inherited it and resumed from where I had left off. The suspense, the anxiety, the need for incessant action which was my American self slowly became less insistent. I was still, and at last began to let life occur to me.

'I think of you—demure, tentative, rather frightened, very warm but in semi-purdah, asking sophisticated people to tell you what they never will,' reads a letter which I receive from a well-known Indian writer. I have been back home for a few years now. I read the letter and wonder about it. Wasn't that the way I used to be fourteen years ago? Wearing pig tails and shalwar-kameez, I had sailed off in a big boat to USA, a country I had conjured up from dreams and books, which, years later, was to become more real than anything I had yet known.

It was a grey September day—there was a drizzle, a chill breeze and two people to receive me at the New York Harbour. She was Kris and he was Paul. She had soft, silvery hair and a round, pleasant face. He was dressed in a grey-blue suit, wore spectacles and had the kind of look that comes from aging purposefully. They were the Costellos from Philadelphia and they had driven up all the way to receive me. I felt wanted right away. Then came my luggage—a few trunks, a few suitcases packed with dozens of clothes, silk quilts and pillow cases, spices and medicines, family albums and souvenirs of home. Without comment, they got together a few porters and had it all carted and freighted by train to Ann Arbor where I was to spend my next few years. It was only when I arrived at the student house that I realised travelling with so much luggage was unheard of in America. A fair, dark-haired girl who was to share the room with me, entered, took one look and shrieked, 'Don't tell me you are going to live with all that

in this room!' Before I could hide my embarrassment she had decided, 'It will all go down in the basement.' The morning after I learnt of other things. I was living in a house which was not a regular dormitory. It was a Co-op where, like the others, I had to work for my living. Within a week I had learnt how to sweep with a long stick broom, how to mop the floors, wash pots, plates and pans in a steam machine, and cook meals for thirty people. When I left the Co-op three years later I had learnt to use my hands. It was as if I held the whole world in them.

I was to see and experience New York City in the summer that followed—vast, vibrant and a world all its own. During the days I had a summer job at the UN, and in the rose-tinted summer evenings I would explore the city with a friend—the old townhouses tucked in the side streets, the seals that lazed in the pond in Central Park, the eating places—nameless continental cafes, the museums, the galleries, the theatres, the meat shops, the bread shops and the people. My friend was a New Yorker and he belonged, I later found out, to one of New York's 400. He wore immaculate clothes, brought bunches of violets when he came to see me and talked of the insecurity that went with living in New York. He reminded me in many ways of Holden Caulfield, the young hero of J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. He had spent most of his life away from home, in private schools in upstate New York, then college in Massachusetts and Ann Arbor. He only went home for vacations and he hated it. He talked about his parents as if they were 'other' people. He did not criticise them openly but I knew that he did not really love them the way I loved mine. He would often question me about home, marvel at the simplicity of my emotions and tell me that I should never change. But why do you wear clothes that make you look so bloated, he would ask. 'If you are thin, why hide it? Why not accentuate it and make it an asset? Look at Giacometti's figures,' he would say taking me to see a group of them standing in the courtyard of the Museum of Modern Art. This was

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the first time that a man had made me feel that being thin was also beautiful. In India, people had never failed to point out that I was thin and should do something about it. I was painfully aware of this and had tried to hide it behind organdies and starched cottons. They lend fullness, I was told. But what kind of fullness, no one explained. My friend did in New York.

It was an autumn afternoon. Alone in a sidewalk cafe I ate lunch and read *The New York Times*. At the next table sat an elderly gentleman. He observed me, nodded and began a conversation. He offered me his apple pie and I offered him my blueberry pie. When the bill arrived he insisted on paying it. A sleek black cadillac with a chauffeur awaited him down the street. He offered me a ride. What do you do, I asked him, unable to connect him with the fancy car, the sidewalk cafe and the homemade apple pie. He smiled and told me his name. He was a retired judge of the United States Supreme Court. Our acquaintance did not end on the street. In the years to come I was to meet his family and was to stay in his Fifth Avenue apartment when I was without a room and they were away in the country.

And way out on the west coast, in San Francisco, while looking around for a quick snack I was to meet someone totally dissimilar. 'Fine Foods. Liquors' read a red sign on the street. I pushed open the old wooden door. Inside was a smoke-filled room. Men in large hats sat at the bar. Others stood around and played billiards. 'Is there anything you want, honey?' bawled out a female voice. 'I am looking for a sandwich,' I said meekly feeling like an intruder. 'Come right in,' she called. 'There is tuna, hot pastrami and grilled cheese. Which one would you like?' Before I could select she had decided that I have a hot one. She called out to Teddy, the bar-man who whistled noisily. 'Get the little lady a hotpastrami and let's sit you down,' she said patting the tall stool next to her. She was an elderly woman in her sixties. She had dull blonde hair that rested sparsely on her head in tiny tight curls.

Her eyes were large, limpid and friendly. Looking at her I thought of all the warm, wonderful women who age but never really lose their grip on living.

'What are you doing here? Do you dance or something?' she asked, staring at my large hoops of earrings. No, I smiled back. What about her? 'Oh, I am too old to do anything now. But years ago I was a cabaret dancer. They called me the queen of burlesque in these parts. It was a beautiful life—beautiful clothes, gorgeous music, grand fun. There was a mystery about burlesque then, a certain beauty. It was as beautiful as the Folies in Paris if you have seen that.' 'I haven't, but I hear it is a dream.' Her eyes beamed and briefly seemed distant. The hot pastrami arrived and whistling Teddy asked me what I would drink. 'A coke,' I said. 'No, have some white wine and it is all on me,' she coaxed. We clinked the tall glasses filled with a sweet Sauterne. The large bespectacled man next to her also joined in. 'He is my cousin from Omaha,' she explained. 'He has come to see me after eighteen years.' While I ate the hot pastrami we talked. She recapitulated the era of the thirties when she was a young girl and I built visions for her of a country she only knew by name. When I said goodbye to her she invited me to lunch for as long as I was in San Francisco. Turning to her cousin from Omaha she asked him to see me to the door. It was only then that I realised two wooden crutches were leaning against her stool. Outside, the cars whizzed by and the day was bright and blue.

It was America that was to take away a lot of my fears, doubts and inhibitions. It was to take me out of 'semi-purdah' into a world where people related to me as I was, without my organdy frills or the trimmings of my glorious heritage. They listened to me, questioned me and showed an interest in what I had to say. I started talking and while they listened I found that I was listening to myself. I was neither 'tentative' nor 'frightened.' People around me seemed open to argument and discussion. They knew their potential and had the confidence that achievement was possible if one worked for it. They prized themselves

When a place becomes a person

on being individuals and welcomed the same trait in others. They had about them a sense of spaciousness, a mobility, an independence and an incurable optimism. Their generosity and hospitality, which probably flowed from a consciousness of abundance, was overwhelming but casual. There was a persuasive 'carelessness' about these people—about their food, dress, speech and manner. They always tried to be themselves and one could not help but be oneself also.

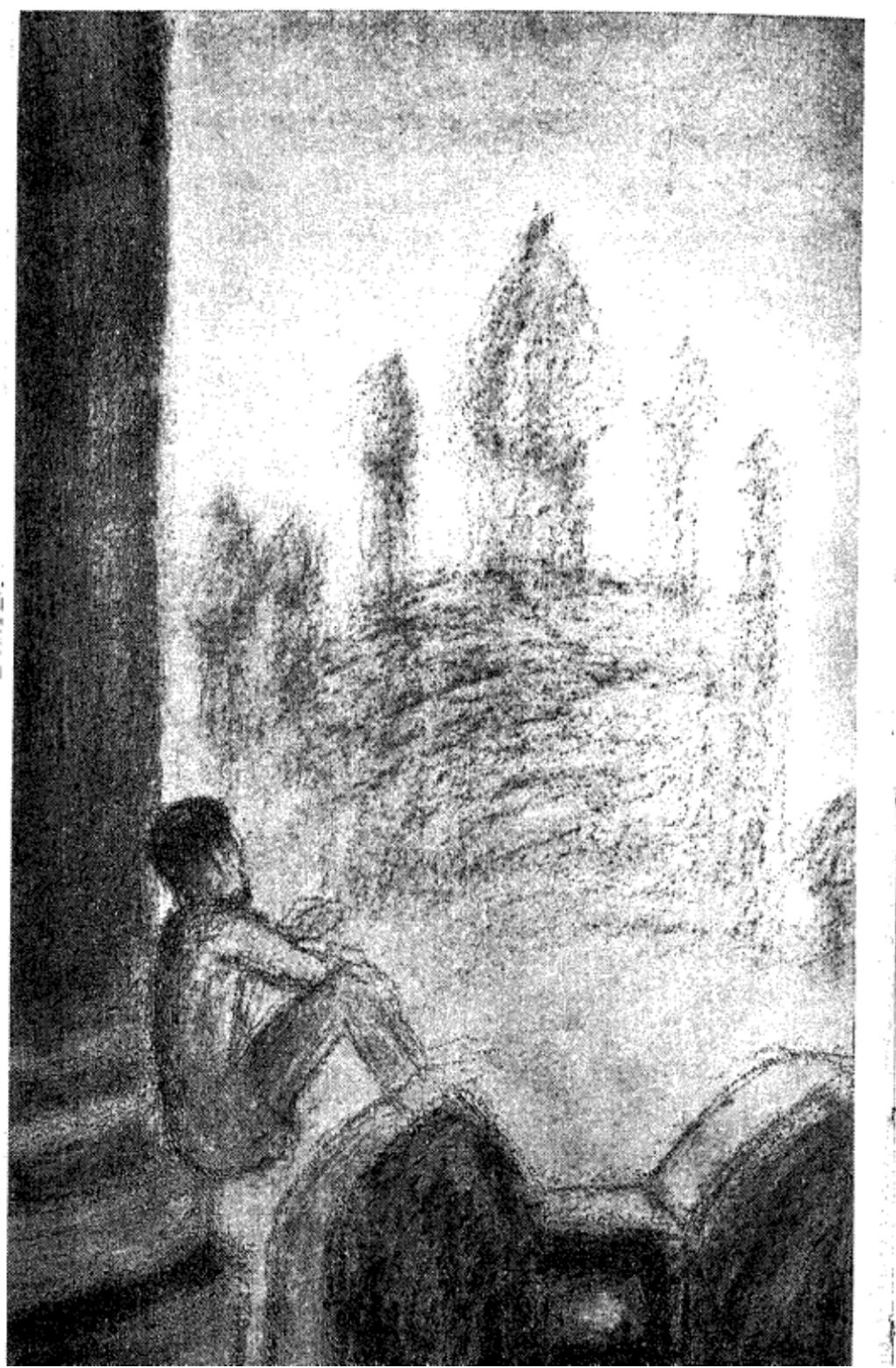
One does reflect, to a great extent, the milieu one lives in. Is that 'self' of mine which found itself initially in an alien country now totally subdued? For I have left that place and come home again. Have I returned to that state of 'semi-purdah,' to being demure, tentative and frightened, as my writer friend described me? Probably I have, in the context of certain people and a certain environment, that has not changed in the manner I have. In what ways and to what degree I have changed or turned 'American' I do not know. I do not wear American clothes nor do I have an American accent. I do not miss rare steaks at dinner nor do I use imported toilet paper. I do not go bowling at the Qutub Hotel nor do I go dancing at the Sensation. I do not know the differences between one rock group and another. I don't own a washing machine, an electric toothbrush, an automatic toaster or a blender. But you are so American, they say. They have charged me for introducing American efficiency in the magazine I edit. I hear whispers that my critical sensibilities and candidness unnerve some Indians. My openness and desire to question and learn has been interpreted as aggressiveness, indicating a lack of feminine poise. Yes, I have turned 'American' I tell them. But you are so Hyderabadi, they rejoin. They accuse me of being poetic, romantic, unrealistic and even feudal in some ways. Yes, I am all that too, I tell them. I am both—I have inherited one and acquired the other. They are both a part of me. Like two siblings, loving, hating, quarrelling but finally accepting each other and lending to the whole a synthesis, an integration.

You can come home again

'What will happen when I leave here? I have no friends any more back home,' I tell my friend who has come to see me off at New York's Kennedy Airport. 'Don't worry,' he replies, 'wherever you go you will make the same kind of friends. Then we will hold hands and form a circle around the world.' I remember his words, for it is really happening...



HYDERABAD
visions of my native city



'This is the Hill Fort Palace, the former residence of Prince Moazzem Jah, the younger son of the last Nizam,' I tell my friends as we sip chilled lime juice under the tinted expanse of a rose-pink chandelier. Through a small arched window I see the city, a thousand points of white and blue lights. In the distance is a misty, grey stretch of water and all around lumpy, aged rocks. On a high hill a solitary white dome—the Naubat Pahad, lit against the night like a paper-cut backdrop. 'Show us your city as you know it and see it,' my friends tell me. It is their first visit to Hyderabad. My memories are very old—of a massive stone fort and many tombs; of Faleknuma and King Kothi, of Char Minar, Lad Bazar and the world they jealously guard of bangles, pearls and perfumes; of the noble mansions in the back lanes and the secrets they carry of a forgotten way of life.

Returning as a self-exiled native, I find myself nostalgic with time-worn visions. The names Taramati and Pemamati spin a romance that I associate with the legend of Golconda, the old Fort. They tumble out of my childhood memories—two ravishing sisters who danced on ropes tied between their pavilion and the King's balcony. Today they sleep beside their royal patron, Sultan Abdulla Qutub Shah, whose kingdom was famous for its wealth of gems and diamonds. Then, there was Bhagyamati, the beautiful consort of the fifth king, who gave the city its name, Bhagyanagar, which later was renamed Hyderabad. And the last of the Qutub Shahi kings, Abul

When a place becomes a person

Hasan Tana Shah who, according to the history books in school, was weak and feckless but who, according to my mother, had extreme refinements that still live in verses and proverbs popular among Hyderabidis. The grains of rice in his *khichri* were cooked to look like fresh jasmine flowers. He bathed in a fountain filled with rose water. When the Emperor Aurangzeb sent a gift of perfume to woo him, Tana Shah detected that it was the stuff used in his stables to bathe horses. They say that it was his highly developed olfactory sense that brought about his fall. While he languished in Roaza, a Mughal prison, a milkmaid was made to pass by his cell. He succumbed to her smell:

Nazakat us gul-i-rana ki dekho.

Qadam uth-ta nahin bar-e-hina se . . .

(Look how delicate is my rose-faced love

She cannot lift her feet, for the weight of the henna.)

....the old man recites as he mounts the jagged stone steps of Golconda where lived Tana Shah and his Qutub Shahi ancestors for a hundred and seventy-five years. The old man is slight, dark, with a trim beard and skinny hands. He is seventy-six and has been at the fort for the last forty-five years. He has now retired but visits the fort every morning. 'It is part of my being. I feel out of sorts when I don't come here.' I look at his faded, grey coat, buttoned to the collar and his slightly rumpled black velvet cap, squarely fitting his small head. I know that he must have been this way all his life. It is only the grey that has faded. His speech, his deportment, his quiet manner still cling to his being. 'People from the north come and say that this fort is just stone. Yes, I tell them. It neither has the delicacy nor the beauty of Delhi's Red Fort or the strength of the fort in Agra. But were not these the very stones that defied the Mughal invaders from the north? Aurangzeb besieged it for nine long months. Had it not been for the treachery of an official who opened a side

gate, Golconda would never have been vanquished. Its stones breathe eternal defiance.' He hands me a guide book which boasts of other things. '...Golconda was also a city of painted balconies, fretted windows and glistening minarets with suggestions of Eastern mysteries in its by-ways. It has seen strange and sad things. Now it is a phantom town rich only in memories of ancient wealth and glory.'

Not far from the fort lie a cluster of royal tombs seared by the heat of many summer suns. Here are buried the Qutub Shahi kings and queens who have lent an aura of grace to the history of Hyderabad. 'This is the most beautiful of the mausolea. Here sleeps the founder of the Golconda dynasty, Quli Qutub Shah,' says the old man, leading me into the smallest and most unpretentious of the tombs. 'He was a good king,' he continues in a heavy voice. His breath smells of liquor and the noon-day sweat. He has a pock-marked face, and dreamy, lotus eyes. He is Ibrahim, the caretaker of the Qutub Shahi tombs for the last thirty years. His is an ancestral occupation beginning with a grandfather who started with one rupee a month, his father who earned five rupees a month, his elder brother who rose to twenty-eight rupees and now he, with a monthly salary of eighty-seven rupees. The difference between the generations is not merely of money but of dedication. 'In the good days of the Nizam we swept the premises perhaps once a month. Now it is government raj. I have to sweep every day and all the tombs. It is no more just going to town, putting your thumb mark and drawing your monthly salary. Now I work nine to eleven in the mornings and the rest of the time I drink the country liquor and sleep in the cool of the tomb.'

Any spirits or ghosts, I ask him.

'No, I have known these tombs for many years. In some of them like those of Taramati and Pemamati and the bloody king Jamshed Quli who killed his father at prayer, I have sensed the feeling of being bodily lifted up and flung out of the tombs. Hence I avoid them. I prefer the tomb of the first king. There I find peace and quiet and a fresh, cool breeze at all hours.'

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I leave Ibrahim, the vast silence and the sun-filled arena of the dead kings. Not far away I see them—the men in shirt-sleeves on bicycles, the women, frail and dark in saris, red, yellow and green; ragged children in the alleys, dogs, cattle and the bustle that goes with the living. I return to the centre of town, to Mecca Masjid, Char Minar, Char Kaman and Gulzar Hauz, structures built by the fifth Qutub Shahi king to perpetuate the royal way of life that he shifted from Golconda to Hyderabad in 1592. The old palace terraces were pulled down by an enlightened Nizam who preferred wider roads and fewer slums. Today, in and around the monumental stone arcade, life continues as if nothing has changed. A maze of streets, the smell of kababs sizzling in shanty joints, shops and crowds of people—cloth merchants, pearl merchants, silversmiths, sweet vendors and nameless pedlars.

One of the narrow streets forking off from Char Minar is the famous Lad Bazar. It is a long street, a winding street, lined with hundreds of shops. Here they sell floral silk quilts, bright checked lungis, old spices, herbs and perfumes; silver and gold laces, bangles by the dozens. In cells of brocade shops, there are metallic-gold shewwanis, gold turbans, chanvars of peacock feather sticks that are swirled beside bridegrooms. 'I have been in this business for four generations,' says the owner, baring a gold tooth. 'We rent our goods to bridegrooms and Bismillah grooms. For eight months of the year, we do very well. During the off-season we sell walking sticks made of teak.' Near his glimmering rental cell is Chunilal Perfumeries, established in 1885. They have oils, herbs and spices that keep the brain fresh and restore the light of the eyes. 'The attars we make are more lasting than the scents that come from "phoren"', says Ram Babu who works in one shop. 'We make ours to suit the seasons. Hina is for winter and Khas is for the hot summer. People in olden days knew and understood this. They knew that the hold of attar lasts for a longer time than that of artificial perfume whose fragrance only spreads

but doesn't last. But people of those days did not like show. They looked for something lasting.'

Up the street which is known as Moti Gully are another group of tiny shops—little rooms crowded with hundreds of glass jars labelled with ancient Persian medical names. I spot one called 'Gulkhand.' It is made with fresh rose petals and sugar, I am told. 'And there are two kinds of Gulkhand,' says an old man sitting in a corner smoking a bubble-bubble. 'Gulkhand-e-Aftaab'i that is made in the sun and Gulkhand-e-Mehtabi that is made in the light of the moon. They are both good for the digestive system.'

In another alley with dimmer lights and fewer people is the Chor Bazar. Here they sell what the rich have pawned away—saris laden with silver and gold embroidery, glass and crystal lampshades, gold filigreed china cups from England, Meissen dolls from Germany and marble statues of nudes and cupids that once stood in the garden courtyard of a Nawab. I ask about the old mansions. 'They are still there. But now dogs bark in the courtyards. One of them has been turned into a marriage hall, another houses government offices while Divan Devdi, the former Salar Jung Museum, now has a lively Super Bazaar.'

I find my way into one of them and meet a lot of pigeons. They do not fly away. But for the pigeons the mansion is deserted. It wears a dull, drab look and has patches left by peeled paint. Inside there are empty rooms and a gaily painted green hall with columned arches. Massive chandeliers tinkle in breezy emptiness. Further in the interiors are people—children playing, a few bedraggled servants, ladies in purdah living in back rooms and finally the Nawab, looking like the aging men in the Mughal miniatures. He is in his late sixties and has a trim white beard, dark wistful eyes and a melancholy face. 'Three hundred years ago my ancestors came from Khurasan in Persia to settle in the court of the Mughal Emperor. Then they moved to Hyderabad where the ruling Nizam bestowed upon them titles, lands and distinctions.

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I grew up in a family of jagirdars and like all my ancestors served the Nizam,' he tells me, leaning against a faded silk bolster. He was employed on the staff of the young prince. There was time then for polo, feasting and long evenings of song and verse. After 1948, polo became scarce, the dinners were less elaborate and the evenings just turned into nights. The king had lost his kingdom. The Nawab withdrew into the seclusion of his mansion. He now spends most of his time reading books that he collected as a youth and smoking the local cigarettes.

I meet another of his class, a lady in her seventies, in another Kothi, not far away. There are rich blossoms of pink and white bougainvilleas at the gate. The ornate reception hall is again empty, seeming more so from the lines of faded photographs that hang high. Her son, a tall man in a short-sleeved shirt and grey trousers, meets me at the entrance. The mansion is old, he says, reading out details from a weathered chart on a side wall. His mother is dressed in the traditional 'khada dupatta.' She wears her hair in a tightly braided plait. 'I learnt my English from Lizzie, a governess who came to us from England,' she tells me in a clipped accent. Her grandfather had his clothes washed in Paris. His bathroom was sprinkled with perfume and incense, as in those days there was no flush system. I ask her more about that time. She breaks into a goodnatured laugh and turns to her middle-aged niece, gently imploring her to enlighten me. 'What should I tell you,' says the niece shaking her noble head. 'Those days were good, grand and precious. There were many parties. As children we would run around to hear the "naubat" at the gate. Then there was an English band that played at the beginning of the party. Usually it would be dinner for 150 people. The British Resident was the Chief Guest. On my great-grandfather's right would sit the Resident's wife and on his left the Resident himself. Opposite him would be Salar Jung, the Prime Minister and all around the table, other prominent nobles of the court. None of the ladies in the house would participate. They remained behind purdah. Only

English ladies were present. Before the dinner started, the guests would all stand and drink health, first to the King of England and then to the Nizam. The toast would be with whatever people wanted to drink—champagne, soda or just water. Yes, liquor of all kinds was served—red, green and yellow. After dinner my father would bring the ladies in to meet my grandmother. She would be seated on a big divan covered with a Persian carpet and near her would be a silver paan-dan. Around the divan would be a circle of chairs where the ladies would sit and have coffee. Some of us who knew English would talk to them or my father would interpret. Later, the ladies would go back to the reception hall and play the piano. We would watch from behind the “chilman”. The old lady sits in a chair and smiles blankly.

Others of her kind have seen a less happy fate. A number of them have died and those who are still alive are unable to continue the way of life that has made their city legendary. Gone are the royal foods and the old-world graciousness. The Nizam’s kitchen which guided the palates of the citizens is no more. King Kothi Road, the silent sedate street on which he lived, where plied the cars only of royalty and nobility, is now being pedalled by bicycle rickshaws. With the passing away of the last Nizam a lot has gone out of the life of the old city. The miracle shrines and the sacred tombs that he patronised have lost their former importance. The eighty-six year old caretaker of Qadam Rassol, a shrine that preserves the foot-mark of the prophet however, talks with great fervour about the shrine. ‘Oh yes, herds of people still come here—Hindus, Muslims, Christians, everyone. Times have changed. The restlessness of the human heart hasn’t changed.’

Beyond the fervour of shrines and the bustle of bazaars, stands another monument of a disappearing Hyderabad—the Faleknuma Palace, a castle-like structure perched on a hill. It was built in 1870 by Vikar-ul-Mulk, the brother-in-law of the sixth Nizam. The story goes that Vikar-ul-Mulk gave away the palace as a gift to the Nizam who used it for his pleasures

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and relaxation. His son, the fabulous and eccentric Mir Osman Ali Khan, never lived anywhere but in the crumbling King Kothi in the centre of the city. His Oxford educated grandson, Prince Mukarram Jah, who inherited his title and wealth after his death in 1967, held his coronation ceremony in the glittering hall of Faleknuma. Otherwise he prefers to stay away from the pillared Palladian. Living in semi-seclusion in a modest villa in the Banjara hills, he looks after his vast ancestral estate, sees a few friends and spends his leisure hours in making and repairing cars. 'It is a difference of a generation,' he says, mechanically explaining the vast complex of changes in a few measured words. Under his sleeping Nizamship, the erstwhile home of his great-grandfather may be turned into a hotel. 'But it may still take time,' mumbles the man in charge, unwilling to accept the change. He takes me on a tour of the castle, stopping and exulting in the mummied splendour that still remains—a silver mango tree in the Jade Room, a bubble-bubble for four in the Billiards Room, a library of Mughal miniatures, an oriental wing of ivory and sandalwood furniture, naked porcelain slave girls, Italian madonnas, one-piece marble bathtubs in rooms as big as ballrooms and leather upholstered chairs to weigh the royalty and nobility.

In one of the small rooms is a pianola. My guide sits down and plays. It is the Anniversay Waltz. 'They used to dance in this room,' he says, almost to himself. In a corner I see a stock of music rolls—Strauss' Rosenkavalier, Chopin's valses, fox-trots and Humpty Dumpty. All around are pictures of dusky ladies in soft silks and pale pink flowers. 'Faleknuma was not a guest house for the ordinary people. Only the ruling class—the viceroys and members of the British nobility—were invited to stay here. Lord Wavell was the Nizam's last guest apart from C. Rajagopalachari, the first Indian Governor-General,' he continues, leading me past a gallery of tall portraits, of men decked in large hats, medals, and caps. Outside on the verandah an elaborate tea has been set in the tradition of old Hyderabad—fancy pink pastries, salty biscuits and curry

puffs, arranged in a formal graph on a crisp white tablecloth. We sit around the table and silently drink the tea.

'Food habits are changing,' says Hyderabad's young Marxist poet, a little later the same evening. We sit on the balcony of his fashionable bungalow that overlooks the lake and a twisted old tree. 'I call it the desolate tree,' he tells me. 'Yes, Hyderabad has changed. It is more industrialised now. It is big and busy. The Hyderabad of yester-years was feudal. It was the creation of craftsmen. Hence there was quality in everything. With industrialism, there has been a lessening of crafts, there is greater uniformity, more quantity, less quality. When Hyderabad turned to a new life in 1948, changes came, but there is still no freedom.'

The museum is no more a place to exhibit strange and weird objectives. It is a place for education and entertainment ...

proclaims a placard at the entrance of the city's famous Salar Jung Museum. Crowds mill through the halls. The slogan acquires a meaning. Every hour on the hour, groups of them stop gazing at the art treasures and hurry back to the courtyard. There, like expectant children, they settle down on benches. A wooden man comes out of a big, broad cuckoo clock and merrily chimes the hour. They count, clap and carry on. 'A deterioration in class,' complains the man in khaki uniform who checks the tickets. He served in the old mansion which had formerly housed the collection. 'In the new building the art objects have been selected and displayed in thirty rooms. The intimacy, grace and elegance of the old museum is gone. However, the feeling of a museum has been gained,' a young man in a brown cotton suit tells me. He is a lecturer in the new museum, with a degree in art history. But like the objects in the glass cases, he remains a thing of curiosity in the changing city.

The Hyderabad I knew seems to have disappeared. Or have I acquired other visions? What I knew and lived with exists in

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nooks and corners. The thrill of seeing it around soon turns into an uneasiness I cannot name. For it exists in a void. It has stayed behind and decayed. I watch the new Hyderabad with a vague sense of acceptance for I know that the exclusiveness and splendour which were a part of it will have to be replaced by other values, another heritage. How well the Hyderabidis will reconcile to it will depend upon the quality and endurance of a culture that continues to be part of them.

LUCKNOW
in search of roots



I arrive in Lucknow nursing a nostalgia I cannot name. It is not a nostalgia of my own for I have never lived here before. It is a nostalgia I have inherited and shared—some from my forefathers who came from a village near here, some from others who are known, are more immediate and have a quality that lends itself to legends. And legends take longer to die.

In Lucknow, I see and sense them. Sham-e-Awadh is as rose-tinted beyond the domes as the poets once said it was. Wajid Ali Shah's baradari is still intact though now rented out for one-night pleasure parties. Thumri was born here. Bindadeen sang here. Strange that people who rent it for a night should think that the baradari belongs to them. A large white house that looks new rises above the squalor of an old street. The famous perfume, Hina, was first made here, I am told. Mosques, Imambaras and tombs silently survive. The Gomti continues to flow. Legends live.

I have an address in Lucknow of a distant relative, grand-aunt of my father. I must meet her, lend immediacy to the legends that surround. Where is Muftiganj, I ask a number of people I meet. They do not know. Probably in the old city, they contemplate and confide. At the Bara Imambara I ask an old guide if he knows. 'Yes, I live there,' he says, 'I will take you.'

We enter the old city. The car goes up to a certain point and halts. Then we walk through long, winding lanes. There is dirt, squalor and a faint stink. My guide stops in front of a door with a jute curtain. 'Son of Mirza Miyan, are you there?' he

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calls out. A young boy tears out of the curtain. I ask him if a lady by my aunt's name lives there. I do not know, he stammers and rubs his one eye. Go and ask your mother, coaxes my guide. He runs back into the house. I hear his voice. Then his mother's voice. 'They moved to Bawarchi Tola, some time ago,' she tells him. The little boy returns and repeats what his mother has said. Two young men come out of an adjoining house. We ask them. 'Oh, you are looking for the grandmother of Jamshed. She lives with her elder son now. He broke his leg.' How do we get there, we ask him. 'Go down to the Gandhi Medical College. Then straight down the road and turn left. At the corner there is a cycle shop. They would know.'

The cycle shop is closed. It is already night. A woman hidden in a white burqa walks by. Do you know the house of so and so, I ask her. 'Yes, her son broke his leg. I will take you,' she tells me and leads the way. gingerly we walk through narrow lanes that curve and crowd into each other. 'Bawarchis of the royal households once lived here,' she tells me. 'Now their sons live. They do other work.' We arrive at another door with another curtain. It is dark in the courtyard and in the rooms surrounding it. A small flame, a candle I presume, lights an interior hall. Someone from Delhi is here to see you, she announces. Who is it, asks a woman's voice in the dark. I am the daughter of so and so, I inform. There is a sudden flurry inside and several women emerge. I do not know which one of them is my grand-aunt. One by one they come and hug me. Finally a frail woman emerges. She hugs me longer and weeps loudly. 'I haven't seen you since you were four,' she says feeling my face with her hands. 'Someone bring a light. I can't even see her,' she mourns. A little girl brings a candle and holds it near my face. I see her too-grey watery eyes set in a small sunken face. 'You have grown thin. Oh those times', she laments. 'We have just returned from the cemetery. We buried my grandson. He died of malaria. He was ten. My son broke his leg. Lost his job. We had to leave the house and move here. Sit down,' she mumbles, placing me on an old wooden chair.

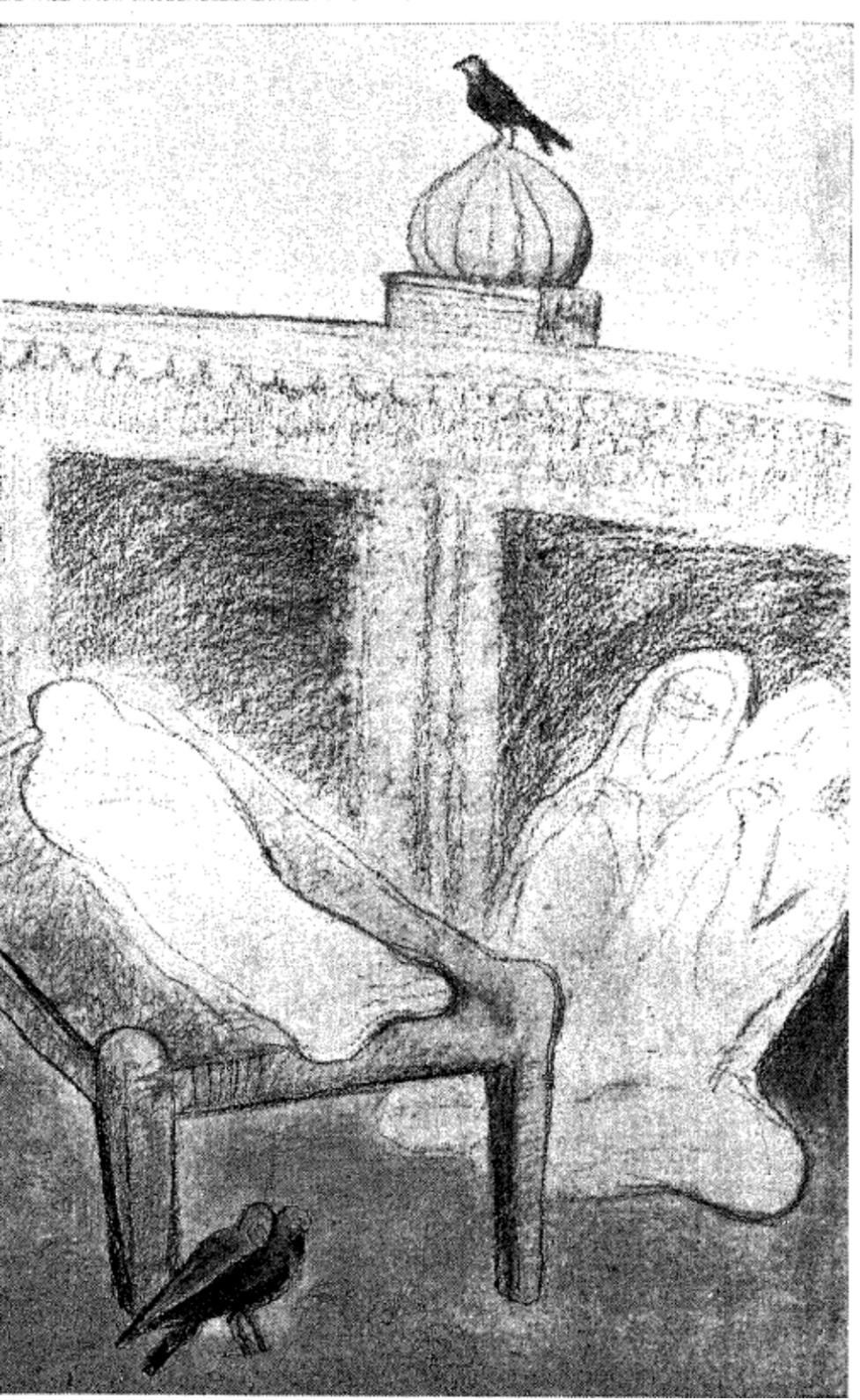
In the semidarkness of the room I see photographs in gilded frames hung high. One of them I recognise is my father's when he was a young man. I sit and listen to her and feel helpless. I try to tell her about myself, my work, my new home. She nods as if she is not listening. I will come back tomorrow during the day, I tell her. There will be light. Probably I will see better, I tell myself.

I leave her in the dark and walk out into the surrounding darkness. The lane takes sudden turns and brings me out on to the road where there are electric light poles. 'You will come back tomorrow?' asks my guide. Yes I will, I tell him, not knowing whether I will ever return.

The next day, I leave Lucknow.



CALCUTTA
beginnings in a graveyard



I arrive in Calcutta and like everyone else am baffled—by the crowds, the noise, the dirt and the chaos. What is it that is really Calcutta? Is it the poignantly portrayed Mahanagar of Satyajit Ray or is it the seething, doomed city of Louis Malle? Is it the dying courtesan of Phanibhusan Acharya or the lyrical, sensuous feminine land of Anita Desai? Or is it all these? 'I am struck dumb,' said Sudhin Datta. 'I who was born here at the turn of the century and have spent most of my years in the city.' He insisted that Calcutta's secret charm was beyond the tourist in a hurry; all he would find was 'an explosive vitality.' But only an amateur of history could really get down to loving the complex personality of the metropolis. I am guilty of being Datta's tourist in a hurry but I also have an amateur taste in history. Will I be able to understand some of the quality of life that makes Calcutta 'a depth metropolis'?

Where do I begin? It is almost night. The clover-shaped pool of the Grand Hotel is sparkly blue and silent. A few people lounge in white chairs under the angular palms. A few stars flicker in the haze above. Outside on the Chowringhee promenade the crowds haven't thinned nor has the noise. People walk up and down, very fast as if they were toy men turned on with a key. Some stand around and watch, doing nothing. I stand along with them and explore—there is Agatha Christie and Georgette Heyer, Kama Sutra, Gandhi, Mao and Geoffery Moorhouse's *Calcutta*.

The crowd moves. I move with them, past the tube-lit rock-

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filled Phillips radio, past a number of men who sit on their haunches and make funny sounds with plastic gimmicky toys. Mrinal Sen's *Calcutta 71* is being screened at the Metro Cinema. I buy a ticket and get in. Walking up the impressive staircase panelled with tall mirrors, I feel I am approaching a grand ballroom. But up at the top there is a mural of deer in a green jungle and a bar lined with dulcet portraits of Arlene Dahl, Lana Turner and Sophia Loren. The bar sells not only tea and sweet mineral water but also beer and whisky, a feature uncommon in theatres of other cities. I find some powerful vignettes of Bengali life in Sen's version of Calcutta but they fade away like unreal ghosts in the confusion of messages that the director flashes with high-powered tenacity.

The morning after, I meet P.K. Roy, Calcutta's senior-most guide who has been especially sent by friends to show me the city. He phones quite early and introduces himself in a mild voice. 'Take your time,' he says, 'I am just sitting in the lobby. No you won't miss me. I am the only one in the Grand Hotel in an Indian dress.' I find him seated on a black sofa—a man with a pleasant, round face, round eyes beaming behind round glasses. He rises to meet me. He is short and stocky, wears a white kurta and dhoti and has a great deal of poise and natural dignity. 'The Grand Hotel is one of the old landmarks of the city,' he tells me as we walk out into the street. There are no clouds; just a hot sun that stares violently from a colourless sky. P.K. Roy does not unfurl his umbrella which he usually carries with him to protect himself from the sun. Today he uses it as a walking stick, leaning against it with his fair bulge. Before we begin our trip, he presents his card. He is Vice-President, Tourists' Guide Society and he lives in Baruipara Lane. In the tradition of a seasoned guide, befitting his rank, he begins historically. 'Calcutta was founded by the British in 1690. The Founder was Job Charnock, the Company's Senior Agent in Bengal. Calcutta was the first capital of British India,' he proclaims. 'Here was heard the first crack of the Mutiny in Barrackpore. Here was born William Thackeray

and here lived Macaulay, right next to the Bengal Club. Even this was built by the personal jeweller of the British,' he says as we enter Calcutta's famous Jain temple, a shrine of filigree delicacy inlaid with a mosaic of gems, stones, mirrors and metals. 'I will not come inside with you. I will stay here and look after your shoes.' In the serenity of the courtyard, amid the clutter of Victorian statues, I see him seated on a bench with two other men involved in a blithe conversation. I hear them chuckle. One of them sweeps the premises and the other is the caretaker, Roy tells me later. They both know him for he has been bringing tourists here for many years.

After the temple, a Memorial: No, I tell Roy. May I see the Calcutta he knows and likes? 'But that is not the Calcutta that tourists like to see. The Memorial was built for Queen Victoria to match the marvels of the Taj Mahal. But the Calcutta I know has none of that grandeur. It is poor and dirty and people generally hate it. They are even thinking of dropping Calcutta from the tourist circuit. Why should they do this? Just because it is poor? But there are many dimensions to this city—it has so much culture, so much history, so much politics.' He insists that we drive around the classic monument that was raised by Lord Curzon. The Maidan around is cool, green and inviting. We stop for a whiff and a vision of the marble mirage. Groups of children with large wondering eyes are being towed around to see a Memorial and shudder for the rest of their lives with a sense of history. In the Maidan, under a green tree, stands Ramlal with a cart, selling fresh fruit juice. Are you a Bengali? I ask him. 'No, I am a Hindustani,' he tells me. But aren't we all? 'No, here they are all Bengalis. I am from Bihar.' He came to Calcutta eighteen years ago in search of work, in the hope that eventually his family would be able to join him. But months stretched into years and they haven't joined him. Ramlal first worked as a hotel boy, then sold ice-cream on Park Street and now sells juices in the Maidan. But his income has remained the same—just enough to survive and send Rs. 50 home. All he knows of Calcutta now is the

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Maidan where he spends a greater part of his day and the tiny nook where he goes to sleep at night with two other Biharis.

'The part that I know well is Dakshineswar where Ramakrishna saw God,' Roy tells me. 'And I live not far from there.' And so we go across the river for a view of the temple from the bridge. Then on to his house. On the road we meet a group of people wearing hard-hats, playing drums. Behind them is being carried the dead body of a woman strewn with golden flowers. 'The soul is going up to a higher level. A funeral is as much an occasion as a marriage,' whispers Roy staring at the shrunken dead body. Perhaps in her death there is more celebration than there ever was in her life. We drive past many women who seem to look like the dead one. Their faces are melancholy. There seems little reason to celebrate the living.

In Roy's house the courtyard is cluttered with junky pieces of furniture and, in the sitting room that is filled with a square divan, there is little else. On a wall hangs the portrait of his dead wife—pale, beautiful and withdrawn. 'She died soon after we lost our ancestral property, now in Bangladesh. She could not withstand it,' Roy tells. Since he lost his house and zamindari he has kept himself busy being a tourist guide. He does not complain about it nor does he dwell on the past that ordinarily tends to acquire epic proportions. He talks about Calcutta and the general misery that is larger than his own. It is probably this acceptance that has taught him to accept his private tragedy with such a gentle quiescence. He has a full life for he has seven children, he tells me. One is away in Canada, another works for the merchant marines, a third went into business and failed, two are students, full of zeal for revolutionary change. 'My daughter also lives with me. She never got married since I became a widower and she had to look after the house. I will see if I can find someone for her,' says Roy as she walks into the room delicately, carrying a tray of new china cups. She seems to be a woman in her thirties with a pleasant face, brown, wistful eyes and a warm smile. As we drink tea she sits quietly and listens to her father

talk. She asks me a few things when he falls silent and wonders if I can come again for a meal of fish curry. When I leave they walk up to the door and wave till the car has turned the corner. On my way back I see little of Calcutta's dirt, noise or crowds. I wonder about Roy and his intense involvement with the happenings in the city and his daughter. She seems to symbolise the long-suffering Bengali woman whom one writer describes as 'graceful, uncomplaining, surrounded by the pungent smell of rice and fish curry, sensuously modest, her voice soft, gentle and low; steadfast in crisis and subtle in spirit—Calcutta's grassroots.' I feel I have seen a bit of this Calcutta surviving in the back lanes of Dakshineswar.

At Mukherjee House off Canal Street I meet another member of Calcutta's forgotten gentry. He is Adrijanath Mukherjee whose family not only owned large estates but also had excellent connections with the British and the wealthy, high-educated and liberal-minded Tagores. It is an afternoon of fish sticks and cheese puffs, of tea in royal blue and gold porcelain cups, and plenty of reminiscences. A short, stocky man dressed in a crisp white kurta and dhoti sits on a white linen 'faresh' with an air of distinction. Around him is scattered hand-carved oak furniture, marble panels, plates of floral Limoges china and portraits of grand, dusky ladies in dull greens and browns. There is a certain melancholy in the elegance of the dimly-lit drawing room, which explains itself as Mukherjee sips his cup of tea and talks about his family. 'We bought this house from the daughters of the last Nawab of Bengal. In those days the entire joint family used to live here, my father and his six brothers with their families and servants. During the Second World War, the house was requisitioned by the government to house British army officers. After the war we sold a major part of the house and this bit remains with me.' Mukherjee still lives here; this bit of a rambling mansion. The rest of it is occupied by government offices and in the garage, is a weavers' design centre. In the muddy compound stands a blue and white bus. It belongs to the Social Welfare

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Department which is trying to propagate its population control philosophies from a room in Mukherjee's nineteenth century mansion.

'From the early days my family was progressive,' Mukherjee tells me. 'In spite of the lands and property, my family also took jobs and worked. My father in the Great Eastern Hotel, at first in charge of bell boys and then in several other capacities. When he died he was the first Indian to be the general manager of a British-owned hotel,' he says, his round face glows with pride. 'Partition changed the fortunes of the family. I tried to organize our little property and even started a business in handicrafts. But it flopped as I had no business sense. In spite of all the odds, we live—and this is because we live in Calcutta where it is possible for anyone to live from the income of six rupees to six hundred rupees. You are never discarded in this city. No unemployed person can survive in any other city but Calcutta. People here are aware, intelligent and emotional. They do not ignore the city or each other.' So Mukherjee lives in his dimly-lit house quite 'decently.' His home is known for fine music recitals for 'music is a passion' with him. He also has an automobile. As he drives me back through the crowded streets, manoeuvring in and out of clattering tram cars, I realize that his horn does not work. 'Pardon the racket my car makes. It is the noisy cylinder which I haven't repaired. It does the job for my broken horn,' he adds with a chuckle as I tremble at the sight of each new wave of people who have to stake their lives against this hornless, brakeless mass of shuddering steel.

'Once upon a time Sir Mukherjee was invited by the British Resident to the Bengal Club,' begins Ghosh Babu in the manner of a story-teller. We sit around in discoloured white chairs and look as earnest as he does. It is a Sunday morning at the Royal Calcutta Swimming Club. Large blue-green flies hop whimsically on our table. A bearer wearing a cummerbund and a red-gold turban, the kind that hovered behind kings in durbar halls, steps up from behind us to cover the beer glasses with cardboard

coasters. Our host orders fish fingers. We sit back. 'Sir Mukherjee it seems arrived late,' continues Ghosh Babu in a grave voice. 'He was served lunch in an ante-room where a table for two was set separately. He was not allowed in the main dining room. Sir Mukherjee did not like that. And that was the beginning of the Calcutta Club.' The story ends. Ghosh Babu lapses into silence and looks away towards the gentle green. Others talk about other things—barbecue nights, suckling pigs, dancing under winter stars and Charlie Chaplin's *Gold Rush*. I talk about the city's dim lights, the night haze (which they clarify is just smog) and my sore throat. 'You will get used to it,' says a man with a square face. He is a doctor who specialises in ear, nose and throat diseases. 'Or it will go away as soon as you leave Calcutta,' he adds with a chuckle. I soon realise that sore throats are a way of life here. The fish fingers have not arrived. They must have gone to fish in the Hooghly, someone remarks, trying to be funny. Ghosh Babu is unamused. His wife breaks into a toothy, raucous laugh that lasts for several minutes. I see tears in her eyes. Her husband's eyes are round and vacant. He knows better.

Bengal Club is now open to all Indians, says an Armenian businessman settled in Calcutta for the last forty years. Which Indians, I ask him. Later at lunch in the hundred-year-old colossus I see some of them scattered at isolated tables. They look like common folk. The men wear suits. The women wear fine Dhoniakhali cottons with wide, coloured borders. A number of them have kum kum on their foreheads, bangles on their arms and gentle, homely faces. Bits of their voices reach us with the breeze. Their English is clipped, their Bengali quick, spontaneous and warm. They seem to know each other, like each other. The portraits of English gentlemen that hang around on walls seem distant. They might as well have been pictures of grand monuments or mighty mountains. Lunch consists of a white lettuce soup, saltless omelettes, curried chicken potato chops and Yorkshire pudding followed by coffee and cigars in a plush adjoining room. Echoes of the

When a place becomes a person

founding fathers struggle and persist. What is your one regret in life, someone asks an ageing, bulky lady who they tell me was a famous star. 'I loved God and I never found Him,' she says in a voice toneless with fatigue. The winter sun streams in through the windows. The air has a stillness, of another age. The faces of the bearers seem ravaged. They have known better days.

Tales sound like legends. Wherever I go, I sense their beginnings. Houses with worn-out fronts, pillars, dim, spacious interiors, dark wooden staircases, antiquated wrought-iron lifts, gates that still bear British house numbers. 'This place is a piece of history where aristocrats dined on the best of Chinese food,' says someone as we enter an old rambling house in Calcutta's China Town. Nanking is now a desolate two-storey restaurant with dark oak panelling, decorative but dull wall hangings, bearers with sad faces and a limited menu. It is a 120-year old building which was to be demolished by Calcutta's municipality. The owners declared it as temple property and saved it. So it stands amid the rubble, the dirt and the poor—Calcutta's only persistent reality. Once upon a time men were beasts of burden. In Calcutta they still are. I see them—lean, bare, small men pushing loads too big for their size. They push loads on carts, they pull men in rickshaws. The oil lamps under the row of parked rickshaws burn dimly through the night. Men sleep shrivelled under them. They have no stories to tell. Their story continues...

'Calcutta has a warmth,' says Mother Teresa fervently. 'People here know each other and when you know each other you love each other. They have an understanding of each other because they share a state of being that is very poor. Poverty is not merely physical but also spiritual. There is a beauty in poverty; a dignity and an acceptance which is perhaps spiritual. To condemn Calcutta is to deny a whole world that thinks and manages to live with great courage.'

Mother Teresa is not a Bengali but she is very much a part

of Calcutta. Fair, fragile with watery brown eyes. She was born in Albania and came to Calcutta at the age of eighteen to teach in the convent of the Irish Loretto Sisters. But by 1950 she had started her own order—Missionaries of Charity—that today is a household word not only in Calcutta but in different parts of the world. According to 1967 figures, Mother Teresa's society runs 44 schools, 23 adult classes in sewing and stenography, 11 homes for abandoned children, 134 dispensaries, 51 leprosy clinics and 12 homes for dying destitutes—helping more than 444,000 poor and sick in Calcutta.

I go to see the woman behind this formidable work. She lives in a bleak, grey house pierced with small square windows. A piece of rope dangles outside the closed door. A tin can rattles when it is pulled and the door is opened by a young woman in a blue-bordered white sari. Inside, I see many women in blue-bordered white saris. They are the sisters of the Order. I wait in a small clean room furnished with a table, chairs and charts of the Mission's schools and clinics on the walls. Outside in the sunny compound sit a group of people. Some of them have come for medicines, some for stipends to buy food, clothes or just to live. Mother Teresa enters the room softly. She seems so small—how does she have the toughness and endurance to do the work she is doing? She shakes my hand—it has warmth and a quiet strength. 'It is our birthright, first to be a woman, then a mother,' she tells me in a soft but audible whisper. 'All this competing with men and fighting for equality is secondary. If a woman would be first what she is, there will not be as many broken homes. What keeps India going are the strong ties of the family. This has to stay; if that goes the entire fabric of society will be damaged.'

'Our bark is worse than our bite,' says P. Lal who came to live in Calcutta from Punjab, but many years ago. He teaches English at Calcutta University, writes poetry, lives in a tastefully decorated house and spends a good deal of his time printing and compiling beautifully bound books in local

fabrics, works of young and unknown writers. Looking cool in a white kurta and pyjama, in the tradition of the Bengalis, he talks about Calcutta at great length and with enormous feeling. 'Only in a city like Calcutta do you find 60,000 people turning up for a cricket match. There is jubilation all over. Even a paan-wallah joins in. He may not be quite sure of what cricket is but he must be a part of everything. He must be a part of the city's mystique.

'Calcutta is the city that least changes, and this is its most lovable and its most depressing quality. That is why people keep on staying here. Even when they go and come back they find the same parks, the same Victorian kind of buildings, the same crumble, the same poverty and the same poetic intensity. Calcutta has always been the home of terrorists. What Calcutta thought today, India thought tomorrow. Ramanand Chatterjee, Prabashi, *Modern Review* and the printing presses began here. The agitation started here. The spiritualisation of the Indian National Movement began here. The average Calcuttan is much more alert, much more sophisticated and has more awareness of world problems than an average Bombayite or Delhi-ite. He reads more and buys more. Bengali publishers can afford to publish in Bengali and sell without too many problems. 20,000 books are published every year in India, English accounts for 10,000. Of the remaining, 3,000 are in Bengali, 2,500 in Hindi and the rest in other languages. Bengali then is the second language. One of the problems however is that people here only read Bengali and hardly any other language.'

Don't they tend to become provincial?

'Yes and no,' he says. 'Yes in the sense that they feel they have a linguistic and cultural identity. No, when you find leading Bengalis involved in different fields of endeavour in all parts of India. A Bengali is not provincial if you know his language and if you interest yourself in the activities that surround him. The best way would be to marry a Bengali. If you don't do that then you meet the Shylock problem: "I

will sit with you, I will drink with you, I will do business with you but I will not marry with you." I have never felt out of form in Calcutta. I was taken in even before I spoke the language and was married here. The Calcuttans are impulsive and friendly, warm and sensitive. One has to know what touches their hearts. For instance, if you don't know the poems of Tagore, I doubt if you can enter the deepest feelings of a Bengali. The door to a Bengali's heart is poetry. Those who come from outside are interested in business and executive work. They never get to touch the Bengali soul and then they accuse them of being provincial.'

The city is reverberating with its old sounds. The problems are not solved. Calcutta is like a half-crushed cockroach. You can't crush it. It has a funny resilience, a vitality and a will-power to survive all kinds of traumas. Foreigners say the city is dying. But when a Bengali says it, his idea of dying is different. Like Phanibhushan Acharya's dying courtesan:

'...we her lovers at different times
Like ghost figures, sit unmoving
Now none of us wants to sleep with her.
In the morning the doctor said
"She needs blood."
None of us looked up.
"Who—me?"
Some were there to retrieve their personal sorrows
Others their moments of priceless pain.
We want every paisa back
No dazzle of spring in the blood-let rose.'

No, the city is not dying but it is not getting the blood.

They all come—the English, the Marwaris and the non-Bengalis, squeezing life out of her, betraying her. The city is not a whore but a beloved.

If she is dying it is because she needs blood.

There is a graveyard in the middle of the city of Calcutta.

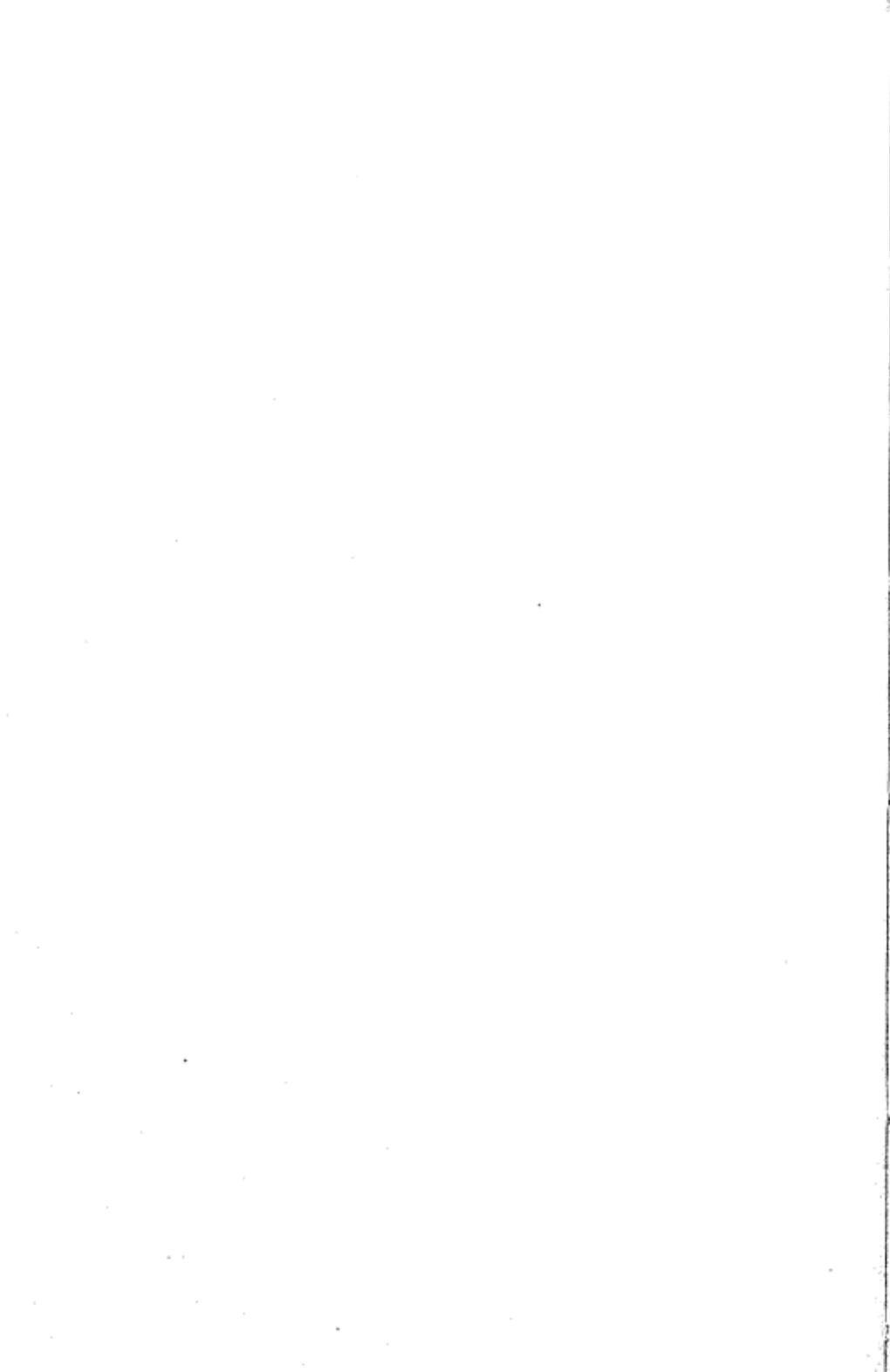
It is large, deserted, overgrown with weeds and wild grass. Here lie the English dead—senior merchants of the East India Company. The tombs have turned grimy with the moss of two centuries. The faded inscriptions on the tombs bear names and dates of men and women who died very young. Calcutta seems distant here. No sounds of the living—just an eerie silence seeming more so with the persistent cawing of crows. I do not see the crows, just hear them. A desolate place, as if life has left it. The unmade paths ramble. I lose my way. Looking around I see something alive—a gaudy red kite and a black young boy flying it. Do you know the way out of here, I ask him. 'Yes,' he says pointing the way with his head. 'I live here.' Why should you live here? I say, disbelieving. 'Because this is where I live,' he repeats unable to understand my disbelief. Show me where you live I ask, persistent. He brings down the red kite and leads the way, hopping over the wild weeds and grass. A tomb with a circular space and two massive pillars is his home. He dusts the stony space with his rumal, spreads it out and invites me to sit down. Whose grave is this? I ask. 'I don't know. They say some Englishman.' I read aloud the inscription on the massive stone : 'Charles Purling, late Senior Merchant in the service of the Honourable East India Company, January 31, 1791.' Isn't he afraid to sleep over a grave? 'No,' he says and smiles.

No ghosts in his life, I tell myself. Where are your parents? 'I don't have any. My mother died, father married another woman. No, I have no brothers or sisters.' How do you live? 'I clean taxis on the cross-roads outside. Yes, I make enough. Depends on the kind of day; sometimes two rupees, sometimes three, sometimes five. Generally I make five. I spend two rupees on food. The rest of it on the cinema. I love going to the movies. I buy the ticket in black. They sell a 12 anna ticket for two rupees. I don't mind spending the money. I love the movies. I like Dharmendra and Hema Malini. They look good together though they are not husband and wife.' What else do you love? I ask him. 'Nothing, just wandering about.'

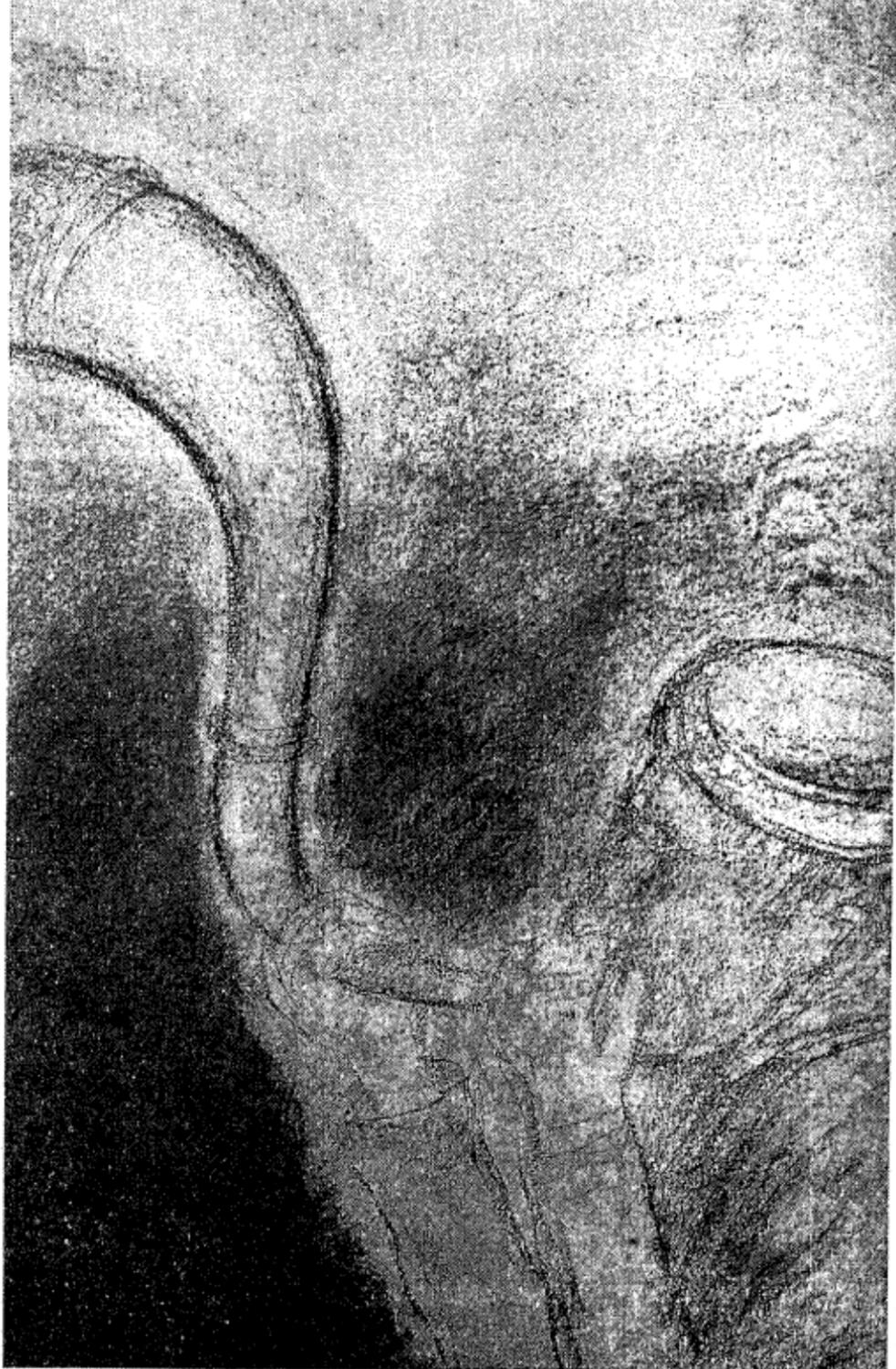
Don't you want to go to school, live in a home? 'No,' he says in a toneless voice. 'It has never occurred to me.' Do you have friends? 'Yes, seven or eight. Some of them sell rice which they bring from the village. Two of them clean taxis. My best friend works at the Sealdah station. Sometimes he sleeps here with me. The others sleep on the pavements.' When you are older and married where will you live? 'I will decide then. For the moment I like it here. No one bothers me. If I am out in the city the police will get me...' A faint smile turns his closed face into one that suddenly seems familiar. I feel I know him. Yes, the graveyard is a safer place. The dead are not cruel.

We walk back over the overgrown paths to the large iron gate. Outside is the city. I want to close my eyes to see better.

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KULU
in the valley of the gods



Kulu Valley. I awake to the sound of the mountain horn. It floats over the hills, rings through the valley and becomes an echo. Someone blows another horn, now on another hill. I turn my eyes and hear it ring. It becomes another echo. With the sounds come the gods. I meet them—now on one hill, now on another. They come from a village up the hill or from a village down the hill. They come with shining faces, seated on palanquins draped in silks of red, gold, blue and green. Two men carry the palanquin on their shoulders, two men beat the round drums and one man blows the long twisted mountain horn. Kulu is the valley of the gods, I am told. All the gods come to Kulu during Dussehra. They go to the Raja's palace before going down in a procession to the maidan. So I go to the Raja's palace to see them.

The Palace looks like a large doll's house with a facade of white, blue and candy pink. On the entrance gate reads a sign in English, Palace of Rupi Raja, Kulu. I meet the Raja as I enter the tall wooden door. He wears a pant and shirt, round dark glasses and the round, velvet, coloured cap which every other man in Kulu wears. He ushers me up to the wooden verandah and leaves me with his 'bahu'. For he is busy with puja, he tells me. We wait for the gods in the sun-filled verandah and drink tea out of green mugs. The drums begin to sound and we know that the gods are coming. Soon the courtyard is filled with a crowd of men in round velvet caps. The drums, the horn, the people lend a frenzy to the mountain air. The

gods arrive. The Raja now stands in the courtyard ready to receive them. He is draped in a red muslin dhoti and a long well-tailored red coat. He still wears his dark glasses and looks impassive as the gods approach him. He touches them, offers them flowers and red silk scarves, and waits. When the gods talk to him, he talks back. Suddenly, amid the din of drums, I hear the ranting of a man.

'The goddess is angry,' explains a shrivelled old man sitting near me on the steps of the verandah. 'She has entered the body of the "chela". She is asking the Raja why he did nothing for the last two years.' I probe. The old man gives me a large toothless smile and continues. 'In 1971 there was trouble here during Dussehra. As the Raja was going in the procession, the police stopped him and arrested him. That was the route where the government had a theatre. The Raja had no business being there, they said. They fired guns and killed a young man. His grave is still there, outside the Raja's tent. After that incident the Raja did not participate in the Dussehra procession for two years. The goddess is now asking him for an explanation.'

Now that the Raja is participating, will Dussehra be the same this year? 'No, it will never be as it used to be,' he tells me closing his round, watery eyes. 'This is dev-bhoomi and there are three hundred and sixty gods in the valley. There was a time when they would all come here for Dussehra. Now only fifty to sixty come. Since the Raja lost his power, things have changed. The government has taken away the devta lands and there is not enough money given to look after the gods. We can't afford to bring them from such long distances. I come because Hadamba Devi insists on coming. She is the mata from Manali. She gave the ruling power to the house of these Rajas three hundred years ago. They call her *dadi*. When *dadi* comes, I come. For I am her *kardar*. As were my father and grandfather.'

Will the gods keep coming and will his son be a *kardar* some day, I ask the old man. Yes, he will be and the gods will stay,

for this is their home. Is there anything more real than the gods, he asks me? I look at his shrivelled face and large believing eyes. I look at the capless young boy who sits on his lap like a crown prince. I wonder and search for an answer.

Outside in the maidan, crowds jostle around the stalls in the vast sunset. Men from the plains sell sweetmeats, beads and numberless things whose names I do not want to know. I get lost in the mela and lose sight of the shimmering gods. They now sit in far-flung corners of the maidan circled by groups of tired devotees. Up on the stage, strung with red and yellow lights there are other organised games—speeches, dances and VIPs. Dussehra is now a bigger happening, I tell myself. And Kulu is no longer a valley of the gods. For now there are more men.

KERALA
where ancient India survives



At Kanyakumari, the end of a land, large black scorpions crawl on the rocks as if they were guarding the sacred shores. The sun sets at the confluence of the three oceans. The air in the temple cracks with the sound of conch and drum. Numberless oil lamps are lit and deep in the recesses of the temple, pujaris perform 'arti' to a radiant goddess. It is like a baroque pageant that has happened for years and that continues to happen every night after sunset. Outside the temple, women sell bags of different coloured sands from the cape. The sands are really the leftovers of a feast that was prepared for the wedding of a goddess, they say. The groom never came, the virgin goddess turned into stone, the rice and the foods that she cursed turned into different coloured sands. Kanyakumari, the virgin goddess, still waits for him. The diamond in her nose glitters for long distances, warning passing ships, averting disasters. The sailors worship her. As do the others. Her vigil is ancient.

The afternoon is warm when I arrive in Cochin. It is not a mere city but a collection of islands swept into harmony by the sea and its waterways. Driving out from the airport on Willingdon Island I see a group of men with red flags sitting under a languid sun. They are Cochin's dock workers on a hunger strike. Their demand is higher wages. This is the first of the many tranquil sit-ins that I am to see in Kerala. Sit-ins, rallies and processions seem as much a way of life here as a basket-ball game by the roadside. I stay with friends in Fort

When a place becomes a person

Cochin, the oldest and most historic of the islands. Here stands St. Francis, a simple, fine church where are buried the epic remains of Vasco da Gama. It was Thomas the Apostle who brought Christianity to Kerala in the first century A.D. And in the Paradesi Synagogue floored with Chinese white and blue tiles play the freckled descendants of the thousand-year old Jews. The house of my friends is white, massive and has a bright yellow wooden gate. Inside, the ceilings are high. There are carved, wooden beams, roccoco arches, wide bay windows that open out on the Arabian Sea and fragile Chinese nets.

Every morning, in the green courtyard next door, I see a white-haired woman in a crisp white sari walking up and down. She uses a stick that lends her gait dignity and rhythm. The looks of a matriarch, I tell myself. Could she possibly be a descendent of 'Strirajya'—a kingdom of women mentioned in Chinese documents of a thousand years ago? And could this kingdom have been Kerala? In a white and blue palace with a quiet courtyard I visit a member of the Royal Cochin family who explains the rare social peculiarity that has been a way of life in Kerala.

'It is a wise child who knows his father—so say the Europeans. We in Kerala have no such saying. The woman has been naturally accepted as the sole force behind family guardianship. If I were a maharaja, my son will not be one. But my sister's son will succeed to the gaddi. It is always the senior-most male of the senior-most member of the female line who is the successor. I am fortieth in line of succession, as the present Maharaja's mother was my great-grandmother. If thirty-nine of them die I would be the Maharaja, that is if the ruling power had not been lost.' Royalty is no more. With the descendants of the good rulers cloistered in palaces, democracy in Kerala survives in the form of other slogans, the most important being the hammer and the sickle. The matri-lineal system is dead but the matriarchal attitude persists. The woman on the green lawn is as regular in her morning walk

as the fishermen at the Chinese nets who scoop out fish from the sea as the sun rises and burns across the waters. When it goes beyond the horizon, some of them light their flames and fish on. Others go home. Almost overhanging the sea, the great nets continue to move, like delicate multi-form pieces of kinetic sculpture. 'Cochin is as busy today as it must have been in the days of the Phoenicians, the Greeks and the Romans,' says my friend who works for a company that sails ships. 'They came from across the seas to trade in cloves, sandalwood and coffee. We still export spices, tea and rubber. Cochin's harbour is one of the busiest in India and yet it maintains part of that old woodcut look it had so long ago.'

'Cochin is a lively town,' says a tall man wearing round, gold-rimmed spectacles. He is Cochin's foremost tea-taster, a profession that is old and respected in these parts. He is an affable man and his home is a centre of sociability and lively interests. One meets here tea-tasters, navy commanders and personages like Lord Harwood and Cartier-Bresson. In his carpeted, air-conditioned office he talks about tea, and in a large hall furnished with a long narrow table, he demonstrates the ritual of tea-tasting. He tastes each of the numberless bowls of tea, peers diligently at their colour, whiffs their fragrance and labels their quality and worth. 'Knowing good tea is as complex as knowing good wine,' he tells me.

At the leather upholstered bar of the Cochin Club I meet another tea-taster of lesser years. In varying tones of enthusiasm he talks about the good life that tea has bestowed on him. 'It is a life of super beer, super squash and super fun,' he beams. When did he begin this life of fun and tea? 'About four years ago,' he says glowing with good cheer. At twenty-six he is quite reconciled to the grand isolation. 'It is a super life,' he says, summing up, gazing reverently at the old shields of ships that hang in a decorative pattern on the facade of the bar. 'The good waiter' as they all call him, faithfully refills the silver mugs with the golden brew. We say little to each other. The waves of the sea purr softly in the background. One can

never ignore the sea in Cochin.

'The waves rose high on the sea. The whales approached him with their mouths gaping. The sharks charged the boat into a terrible whirl. But he escaped from everything miraculously. Not only that ... he came ashore with a very big fish. How was he saved from that storm? How did all these things come to pass? Because on the shore a chaste and pure woman was praying steadfastly for the safety of her husband at sea.' A prayer and a way of life for the daughters of the sea. Its philosophy is the story of *Chemeen* a sensitive, lyrical tale of Kerala's fisherfolk. The writer is Thakazhi Sivashanker Pillai. He lives in Thakazhi, a village from which he acquires his name. I drive down to Thakazhi to meet the man whose writing first introduced me to the life of Kerala.

Thakazhi is a small village amid green paddy fields and green palm trees. A number of people in the village know the writer's house. It is the house next to the clinic, they tell me. I find it behind some dust-laden trees, a small brick house painted blue from the outside. A tall, statuesque girl with shiny black hair and bright black eyes stands above three stone steps and tells me that her father is away. He has gone to the cinema in Alleppey, a matinee show. She does not know when he will return. He went by bus. May I leave a note for him? She leads me into the brick house through the side entrance. We enter a room, empty except for a dining type table and a few chairs. In a corner rises a mound of paddy. Men with sacks of grain perched on their heads go in and out. I realise then that the writer is a farmer. While I write the note the tall statuesque girl stands and smiles. She has a perfect set of white teeth. Her mother, a smaller, thinner woman with greying hair appears and offers coffee. The writer must be an older man, I tell myself. He is about sixty, she tells me later. Where does he do his writing? 'Right where you are sitting,' she says with an easy smile. I am sitting in a pouched deck chair of striped orange cloth by the side of the window. Outside, laze a few cows. The paddy fields are green and the stacks of hay high.

'Did he write *Chemeen* here?'

'Yes' she replies. 'But in those days he also used to work in the law court at Ambalapuza. Going and coming he would see a lot of fisherfolk. Some of them were his clients.'

I decide to go to Alleppey and meet him. How will I recognise him when he comes out of the film show? Is there a photograph of his around? They laugh goodnaturedly and tell me that there are no recent photographs. The daughter runs into another empty room and returns with a photograph of three men seated in a row. The middle one is her father, she whispers. That was forty years ago, the mother adds. Hoping that the years haven't changed his looks I drive up to Alleppey, a short journey through gentle green. When I arrive at the loudly painted cinema hall, the usher tells me that the show is over and Thakazhi has left. 'You will never be able to locate him now. He must be in one of the toddy shops.'

I soon find out that Alleppey has a number of toddy shops. It also has green canals, elegantly shaped wooden boats and women rowing. Alleppey is the Venice of the East, boasts the driver in a matter of fact manner. He drove an army truck during a World War and hence he knows, he tells me. I agree with him. Alleppey has some of the filth and some of the langorous charm that one associates with the famed canal city. As the electric poles glow on the streets I purchase a coir mat that I have watched being woven on a pavement and I leave Alleppey without meeting the famed writer. He has now become for me as elusive as the friendly ghosts who are known to inhabit the old colonial houses of this green canal town.

The sun is hot and white in Kottayam. The streets are filled with cars and people. It is known to be a prosperous town, the Rome of the ancient Syrian Christian community, a city of churches, good business and culture. I find a few church spires rising above the tawdry reality of the town. All over the bustling town are shops with red, green and blue plastic buckets hanging in front like barricades. I wonder if plastic buckets form the bulk of Kottayam's business. Are they the new symbols of the

town's synthetic prosperity?

Lunch at the Palat Pickle Factory is hot and friendly. It is strange to meet, at the factory entrance, a lady with short skimpy hair and sad, watery eyes. She shakes my hand and says that she is a graduate of the University of Michigan, 1928. In the interiors I meet the owner, a graduate of Oxford. The Balliol shield hangs proudly behind his work table. When he stands up to greet us, his long white dhoti trails the floor. In the room behind there is noise and activity. Women in white dresses and indigo-blue aprons are huddled in circles chopping limes, mangoes and pineapples. The Palat Pickle Factory is famous for its jams and pickles of home-made quality. Lunch is served in the kitchen, steaming hot. There is husked rice boiled in a ball, red hot fish curry, a white prawn salad and rings of pineapple fresh from the Palat cane. While we consume generous quantities of food, the owner talks about the satisfaction he gets from running a pickle factory. Its joys supercede the comforts of Metal Box, a British Empire establishment that thrives on container business. He has finally returned home, he sighs—where the landscapes are green, where literacy is high and where a political consciousness is as old as the hills. When we return to his office room the ceiling fan has stopped whirling. In the warm silence we sit and talk of rosy visions as men in abbreviated dhotis march past the gate shrieking gentle slogans and waving red flags. They seem neither angry nor aggressive. They seem to be demanding very simple things. They might as easily have been a rally of boy scouts except for the red flags that seem sinister, fluttering above their heads.

I later meet an eighty-year old Syrian Christian patriarch, a retired engineer, who lives in a large yellow house and reads a lot of books. I ask him how and why communism happened in Kerala.

'Kerala was communist forty years ago,' he pronounces in the manner of a solemn school teacher. 'Because of the dense population, because of unemployment and because of poverty. The high rate of literacy here enables an average man to know

what exactly is happening in his own State and also the rest of the world. It was in Kottayam that the first English school was started in 1810. It was again here that a women's school began. My grandmother was given a bribe of a sovereign to leave her village and join the boarding school. There are more daily newspapers in Kerala than anywhere else. Hence, when the democratic vote was given, the literate voters came to know that if they organised themselves, they could snatch away from the government, benefits which they were being consistently denied. The only powerful party which was able to give them leadership was the Communist Party. It was at that time as democratic as any other party. The only difference being, the communists said they will not hesitate to use violence to achieve their ends while the Gandhians stuck to non-violence.'

How did a people apparently so deeply religious and caste-conscious turn communist? I ask him.

'All religion in Kerala is practically superficial,' he says. And I think of the small, pretty temples with their red-tiled gabled roofs tucked so naturally and comfortably in the green landscapes.

'Religion in Kerala is steeped in superstition,' he continues. 'Today we are living through a period of adherence to superstition as well as revolt against superstition. Fifty years from now there won't be any organised religion in Kerala. Some form of personal religion may survive. Communism and atheism should not be confused as one and the same thing,' raising his voice to make me understand better. 'If there is fifty per cent of religion in an average Hindu, there is at least fifty per cent of that religion in an average communist also. There are top-ranking communists in Kottayam who are also members of the church. They go to church on Sundays, have their children baptised and their marriages performed with the sanction of the Bible. The superstitious part of religion continues. The communism that exists is an economic attitude. It has nothing to do with religion. It has come to stay. It will

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remain the common man's ideal for some years to come.'

What has it achieved in the years it has survived?

'An average Harijan who formerly had to stand away at least a few furlongs, from the houses of people, can now get into every hospital, every public office. A Harijan in Kerala is able to make better use of the benefits available to him as he is better educated. With caste barriers lessened they are better able to organise themselves into powerful labour unions. The communists came in and the beggars virtually disappeared. You see no beggars on the streets of Kottayam. Isn't that a big enough achievement?' he asks, turning his large speculative eyes to me.

From Kottayam the road climbs higher, the heat swells and the greens get greener and thicker. I see rubber trees that are tall and bright green, squat bushes of tea laid out like kitchen gardens on hillsides, and all along the road, school children with books and bags and men chasing groups of emaciated cattle. As the road descends into the forests of Thekkedi the heat dies gradually and soft breezes touch the cheek. In the rambling forest bungalow which now serves as a hotel in the Periyar Wildlife Sanctuary, there is cool and silence except for the sound of crickets in the dark.

'You can see a number of wild animals when you take the boat ride in the lake,' the young manager of the hotel convinces me, smiling shyly. 'This is elephant country but we also have bison, black monkeys, wild bear and sambar.' It is already night, a time to withdraw into the wooden panelled room and wonder—about the animals, the deep woods and the vast silence. But so on it is dawn. The young manager is bright and crisp in a white shirt and trousers. With him is Mr. Wood, whom the manager had earlier described as an Englishman. I see little of the English in him except a battered accent, reminiscent of the Royal Artillery jawans. He is a man of seventy-two, erect in a round, hard hat and khaki socks pulled over the knees. 'I have been a forest ranger for forty years,' he shrieks as the motor boat chugs down the lake, in and

out of stumps of dead trees. 'It is a good life living around animals. They are better than human beings. If you watch them long enough you understand them.'

I follow his long-distanced gaze and see some of them ambling down a wooden hill—a group of dark brown elephants, a few large, a few small. 'The mother elephants always guard their baby ones jealously, lest the humans see them and steal them away.' Little do the elephants know that times have changed. The grand humans who gunned them down or carried them away to ride on them as royal beasts are now few and powerless. All that remains of their glorious past are tales of nostalgia, a faded shield or a photograph. The national coat-of-arms of ancient Kerala with its two elephants romping on either side of a conch shell, still hangs high under the roofs of several royal houses. People come from far and near to stay in these secluded bungalows to see the grandeur of wild elephants and to feel the silence of the forest.

The house on a high rock by the bay of Kovalam, which once belonged to a bishop and was later bought by the Maharani Regent of Travancore, has now been turned into a five star Palace Hotel. Kovalam Grove seeks to perpetuate some of the legends that have come to be associated with Kerala. A laudable project, I admit—and so fashionably manicured to blend with the 'primitive' landscapes. It is probably one of Kerala's new wonders judging from the number of visitors who come to see it in the early mornings. I see men and women, often children, escorted by their schoolmarm's coming in bus loads. They stand and stare, cluster by the beach and even tickle their feet in the blue waters. Others who are more adventurous brave their way into the kudil bar and sit reverently, sipping lemonades and cokes.

Not too far away from this man-made haven is Kerala's natural place in the sun, the green languid backwaters where the quiet and calm has another eternity. I step gawkily into a wooden catamaran and the two boatmen row me, lazily. The younger of them is the principal rower—a man the colour of

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ebony with a very happy face. The older man is his father. He only sits at the edge of the boat, and gazes into the air with large, filmy eyes. Now and then he bends down to gather the water that has oozed into the boat, with a discoloured palm leaf. The younger man pierces the water with his long wooden pole, draws it out with force and flails it in the air. The fragile boat inches forward. Down comes the pole again, and out into the air. He looks like an Olympian dancer. His motions have a force and sustained rhythm, creating an arabesque of great vigour. The boat glides on the green waters. Children play around at the edge of the lagoon, their hair seeming blacker in the water. We pass little houses on the island, sometimes a cluster of them making up a village. A cow lows in the distance and makes me aware of the green silence. Old men come up to watch the boat row by. They stare and smile. One of them asks the boatman, where to? 'Nowhere,' he says and rows on.

KRISHNA COUNTRY
kaun gali gaye shyam



Mathura, Vrindavan, Gokul and Govardhan—places that tumble out of memory as half-dream, half-reality. Places that I associate with Krishna, the blue-black god, his flute, his milkmaids, his pranks and play in green, green gardens. On a rain-washed Wednesday I visit these places to seek the legend, the truth.

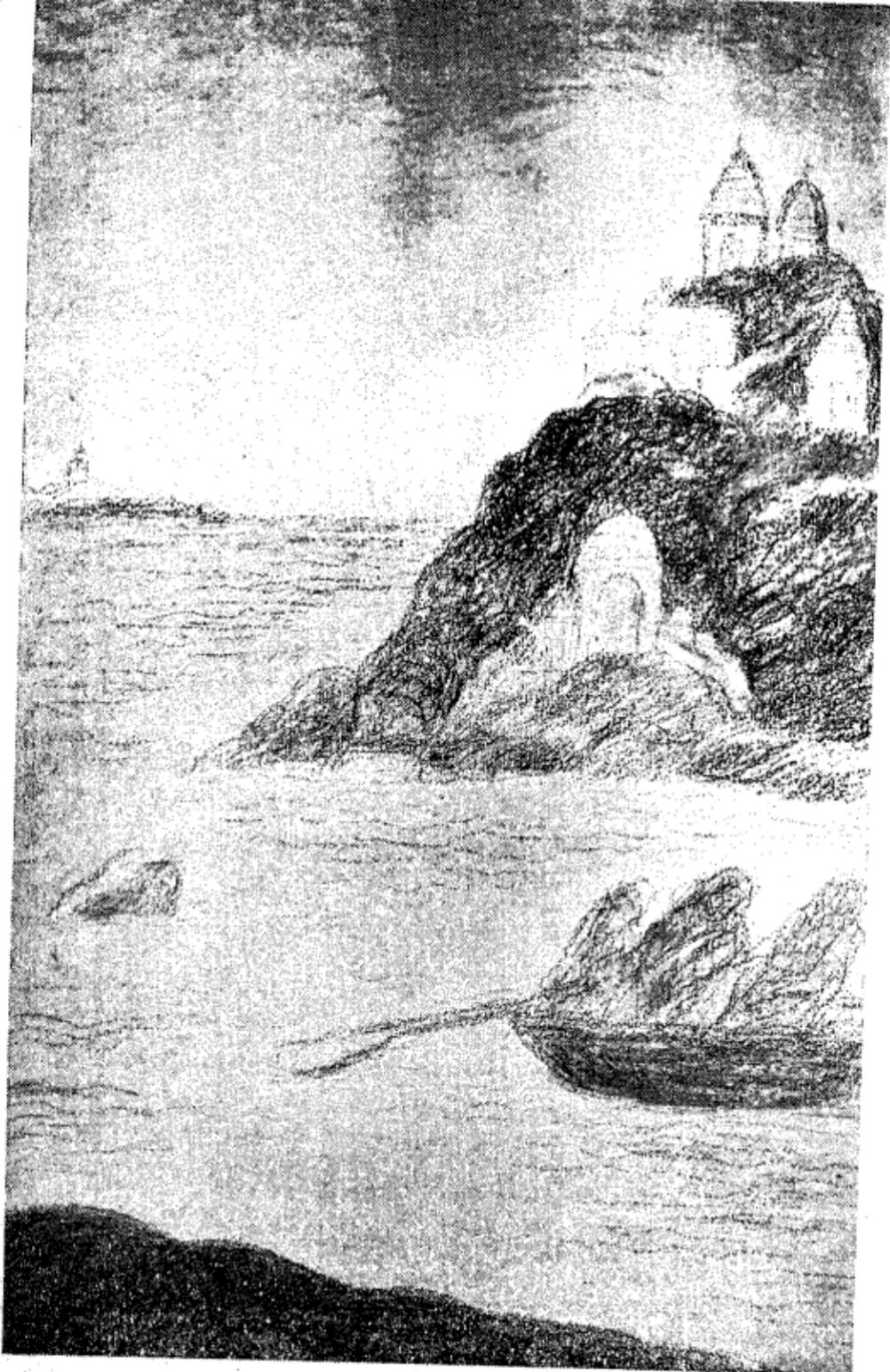
Wednesday is a holiday in Mathura but not for the temples, the tourists or the Pandas. In the melee of the long narrow main street, I begin encountering them—first one, then two, then a horde—the white-robed, saffron-robed Pandas, keepers of all my mind's legends. They emerge from several little lanes, pounce on me with words that sound like incantations. I pick one of them hoping to be delivered from the rest. He is a tall young man with a black beard and tired, black eyes. We begin our pilgrimage along the Jamuna. He walks beside me, barefoot. His washed white dhoti beats against his lean legs as a soft breeze rises from the waters and purrs on the cobbled stones. By the river, in and out of bitty lanes we peep into desolate niches and temple courtyards that house images of Krishna. I soon realise that I have to pay even for a peep. My guide silently watches my discomfiture. Says little. Krishna has been his god, his father's god, and his grandfather's god. And they were all Pandas, proud priests of a certain temple where Krishna still sits garbed in dull red and tarnished gold. It is a solemn Krishna. He has no flute. And my white-robed guide has solemn tales to tell. They are not the tales that I had heard

in songs or read in children's books. 'We can't look after Krishna any longer,' he tells me. 'There is no money even to get the temple swept. We have always lived off the offerings that devotees give. Now they come like tourists. They want to see everything and give nothing. You can't live a good life and just be a Panda. My father can be nothing but a Panda. I am younger. I can do other things. So I spend my days being a tourist guide.' Can you make a living? 'Yes, I earn three to five rupees if it is a good day.' Why so little? 'There is too much competition in Mathura. All the Pandas want to be guides, for they know best.' My guide knows his business. He stops at stores, advises me about beads, bangles and old brass. He knows all the shopkeepers. They sell me goods and smile at him. He fetches a tonga for me. The tongawallah knows him, chats with him. The ride over, I pay my guide his fee. The tongawallah pays him his. My guide's tired eyes beam for a brief moment. He hands me a piece of paper and asks for my address. 'If I come to Delhi I will come and see you. You can teach me English.' Will he be a better guide then, I wonder as I scribble out my address and leave him outside the temple of his ancestors. Inside, his father sits mumbling to himself the tales of Krishna that a visitor like me has failed to understand.

But on to Vrindavan, I tell myself—a place with less crowds, fewer shops and greener gardens. Lunch under a neem tree in the deserted dak bungalow. Time to hear the gush of a one-spout fountain. And a squirrel pouncing near, seeking crumbs. The wooden gate creaks open and I see a lean, dark man in a white dhoti advancing towards me. Will I hire him as a guide to show Krishna's garden? His fee will be just two rupees. Yes, yes, I mumble. But how did he know that I had arrived? I do not ask him. He offers no explanations. We begin our tour—first a large, red, shiny temple built by a wealthy Gujarati businessman; then a smaller temple under an old pipal tree where Krishna killed a crocodile; and on to a marble-tiled temple where, under a red-clad Krishna, sits a saffron-robed Panda. Stacked in a corner are clusters of long

sticks. What are they? I ask. The Panda shushes me to silence. First you hear my story, he tells me, repeating the same tale which the young Panda had told me in Mathura. No devotees, no money, no joy in living—and hence Kaliyug. I stare at him, listen and feel numb. But where are the Vrindavan gardens, I ask my guide? Not far away, he assures, leading me down deserted lanes lined with white brick houses. They seem empty of people. Who lives here? 'Old people. Religious people. When people get old they come here to find god and die.' We walk through a courtyard, under an arch and reach the garden. 'Take your shoes off and go in. The garden is inside,' he tells me. Through the arch I see some worn out trees and a cow scrounging under them. Is this where Krishna once played? 'Krishna still comes here at night,' says my guide as if he has read my mind. 'And all the animals go away—the cows, the monkeys and the birds.' Probably night is the time to visit Vrindavan, I tell myself, not removing my shoes.

PATNA
a place by the Ganges



Patna is shanty, crowded and nondescript. Streets stretch endlessly, aimlessly. Cars hoot at rickshaws, rickshaws hoot at cycles and cycles run into pedestrians. Streets are filled with squalor, filth and many, many poor people. It seems as if they live on the road, cook and eat on the road, sleep on the road and do everything else on the road as well. I see them in lesser numbers as the centre of town meanders away into greener, less ugly perspectives. There are taller and bigger buildings, colleges, schools, Vidhan Sabha, secretariat, others—some seeming more exclusive with barbed wire barricades around them. 'These are the ornaments of our city,' someone remarks with a sneer. Before I am able to question him on the relevance of his remark, our car dashes into a bullock cart. Three old men with large turbans, presumably farmers, fall off the cart. We are surrounded. There are curious faces, there is frenzy, there is commotion. A few men take charge, show concern, question us and pack us back into the car before we know who hit whom. 'It is strange that the crowd was so friendly to us,' says the man who drives the car. 'There is less sympathy for those who move around in cars these days.' Were the men really friendly or were they paid to help us leave? Slightly ruffled, I sit in the back seat of the car, staring out at the unchanging ugliness of the city.

Patna's only relief from ugliness is the Ganga. I see it stretching below the lawns of the Bankipore Club where I have come to stay. It is the poshest place in town, I am told. It was built

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by the British about sixty years ago. E.M. Forster stayed here once and wrote about it in *A Passage to India*. Now it is being painted a garish green. My room is in the backyard premises of the former Army-Navy Store. It is dark and damp as it has not been opened since the store shut down. Large spiders weave webs above the desk, and in the bathroom there is a large, tin tub, the kind that grandmothers used a long time ago to bathe babies in. But on the lawns there are discoloured chairs, bright sunshine and a wide vision of the cities. There are sailboats, fishing boats and a big steamer with a haunting toot that brings back vague echoes of Mark Twain and the Mississippi. Patna's elite gather here, on the sunny green, to drink beer and eat platefuls of shrimp, fish and fowl. While they eat and drink and gaze across the river, a thin, dark man with a wooden pole stands like a scarecrow and shoos away the black crows. The elite on the lawn are unaware of his presence. And they are unaware that nearer them, by the river banks, are the ghats where pigs scrounge, men relieve themselves and garbage lies in big and small mounds.

Snacks arrive on a tin tray covered with a kitchen cloth. There is lipstick on the tea-cup and a mosquito afloat in the milk. Why is everything so dirty in this poshest place in town, I ask a young professor who is a club member. 'That is the way everything is in Patna,' he explains controlling a yawn. 'Those who belong to the club have money but little else. They do not see the dirt for they live in it all the time. How can they expect the club to be cleaner than what their homes are? How can they demand anything better when they do not know how to demand? They have money and they are bored. They come here to booze and play flush. And mind you, they are the best of what we have in Patna.' Why such apathy, I ask the professor. 'Shall we call it instead a sense of relaxedness? That which perhaps gives them their identity? In Bihar each one has his roots in the village. Whether it is a clerk or a politician, they both transplant their village values in their urban homes. In India real intellectual urbanity does not exist, as it doesn't

anywhere. What does is put on. Genuine urbanity comes with a leisured sense of sophistication when no survival risks are involved. I guess urbanity existed here a long time ago among the aristocracy but it was an urbanity of manners, of hospitality, large marriages and large expenditures. Even that is now dwindling.' I leave the professor to his musings, to his beer and his view of the Ganga. The thin man continues to stand and shoo away the black birds.

At the coffee-house downtown, I meet other young people who talk about other things. Some of them have been to jail. Some have plans to. Some of them write poetry, some indulge in theatre. Some of them are unemployed, some are active in politics and some just sit in the coffee-house, mornings and evenings, drinking cups of coffee for just a rupee. Here I find clean tables, good coffee and a semblance of a coffee-house tradition, a welcome happening in Patna. Here also I meet a young Hindi poet who takes me on a tour of his town in a cycle-rickshaw. While it plies jerkily through the turmoil of the streets he quotes *dohas* from Tulsidas and Renu, the poet from North Bihar. Tell me about yourself, I ask him. 'What is going on in Bihar is more important than myself. For I am just a poor man. I was born in a village in Monghyr district which only had five hundred homes, four hundred and fifty of which were Muslim. But I never felt that they were separate from us. Everything in Bihar is measured by caste but I have never felt this. I ate in their homes and they ate in mine. I did my M.A. from Bhagalpur University and came here. Patna then was a big city to me. People here seemed to look at the clock and live. They also looked at me because I wore kurta-pyjama. I found myself a job in a cooperative. In seven years of work I have got only Rs. 300 in the bank. I live in a hotel room for which I pay Rs. 27 a month. We are in chains. financially. Sometimes I sit in the coffee-house and do not even have enough money to pay for my coffee.' I listen to him and marvel at his simplicity and candidness. At times I am surprised by his attentions. He picks a hair away from my shawl, commands

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that I cover myself with a *chadar* when walking on the street, hails rickshaws, argues their fares—all with an instinctive gallantry which I deem a natural part of him.

The way back to Bankipore Club is littered with paan shops, sleazy tea shops and a large *sabzi mandi*. On the road cobblers sit and mend battered shoes, women old and young cook 'sasti roti' that sells for 25 paisa a piece. At night when it gets colder men and women lie shrivelled by the roadside, wrapped in old cotton sheets. Tiny flares are lit, turning the shoddy bazaar into a poor man's fairyland. Do you know this house, I ask a pretty young woman who lives in a hovel across from the famous club. 'Yes, Babu-log have their parties there. There is also a *sabzi mandi* inside. We go to see the large tomatoes, red beetroots and sunflowers.' She is referring to the flower shows and the vegetable shows which the ladies of the club hold every year. She tells me that she is allowed inside the club once a year. She is a Harijan. Her husband is a sweeper in the Revenue building and she stays home and makes baskets of *sikki*. Her home is a smoke-filled square without a window in any wall. Though made of mud, its outer walls are washed white and painted with red trees and blue birds. 'We paint our house during Divali,' she tells me in a matter of fact manner. Why don't you make a window in your wall and clean up the filth around your house? She stares and turns blankly to her husband. 'Never thought of a window,' says her husband. 'And why should we clean up other people's mess? It is everywhere.' They are poor, they are filthy but they are not without a personal aesthetic instinct. Are they aware of the larger realities that surround them? How are things, I ask an old woman, sitting on the road, pulling a *huqqa*. 'We live. Isn't that enough?'

Rattled, I return to the Bankipore Club. Things are different in North Bihar, someone tells me, when I return to the green lawns to gaze across the river. The next morning I cross the Ganga in the large steamer with the haunting toot. There is a chill wind and many passengers shivering on the decks. Seated

across from me is a man in a white dhoti and a black vest. He stares at me steadily through black-rimmed glasses and says nothing. Are you from North Bihar I ask him? 'Yes, I am from Hajipur. It is a town across the Gandak bridge, the same bridge which Ram and Laxman once crossed to meet Sita in Mithila. I live there, I am a Congressman.' A tall, thin man with a shrivelled face takes a seat by my side. He has small, bright eyes and he wears a woollen cap pulled over his ears. 'I have seen good days and bad days. I have read all the scriptures. Now I read hands.' The Congressman in the black vest brightens up. The thin man with the shrivelled face takes his hand, feels it and peers at it. 'It is a strong hand,' he pronounces. 'The lines are clear and sharp. You have a strong hand but a weak heart. If all goes as it has been going you will get what you want.' The Congressman turns to me looking triumphant. One by one we present our hands to the man with the shrivelled face. The steamer sounds its haunting toot. We are in North Bihar.

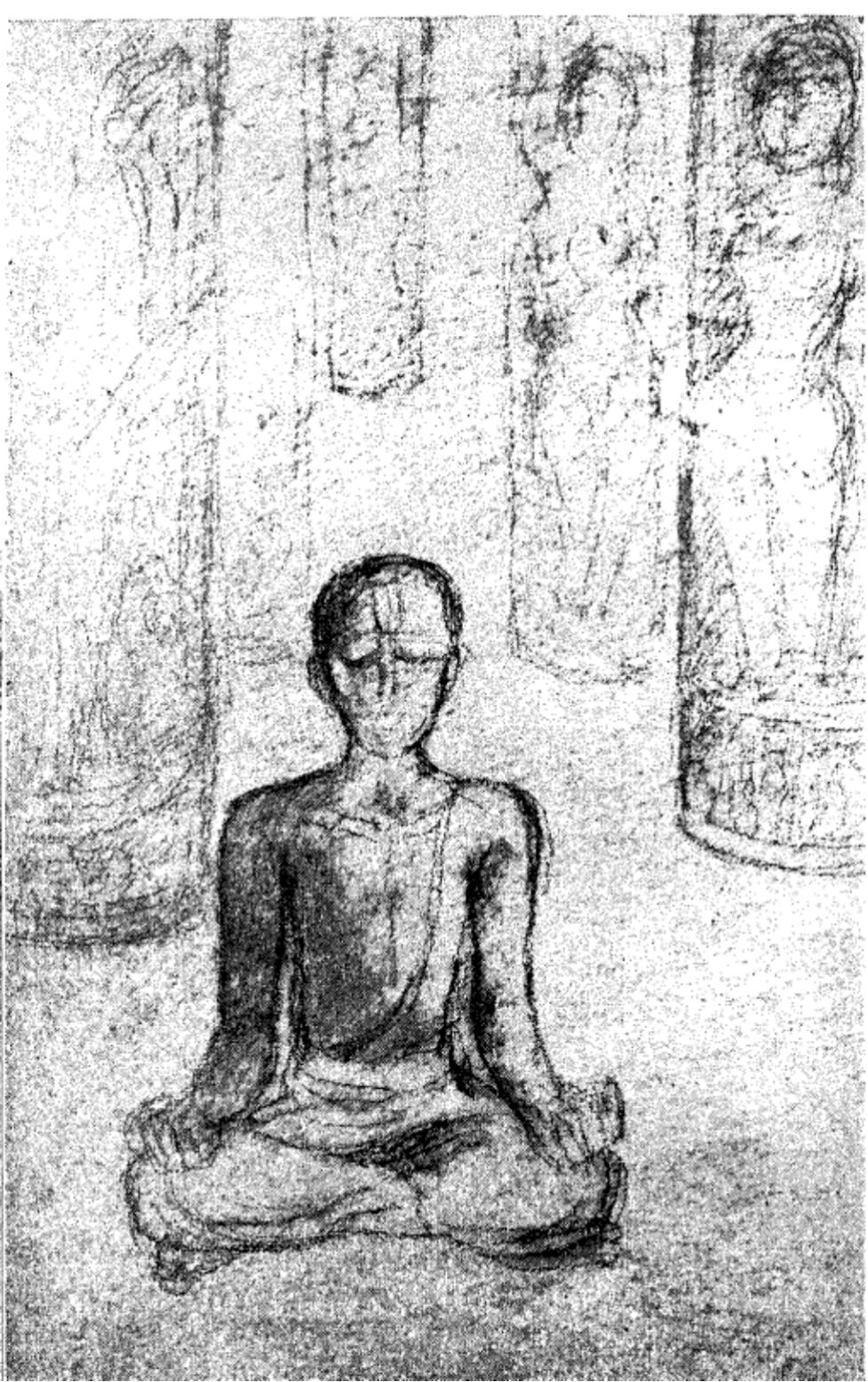
'When I was a young boy in school our teacher would ask us, which is the station with the largest platform? We would answer, Sonepur.' That was years ago. The young boy is now a greying man and Khadakpur is now the station with the largest platform. Bakarpur, a little place with some green trees, some mud huts and a potter's family is a short, jingling ride from Sonepur, the town known for its elephant fair. The potter is a dark man with a weathered face and weathered hands. He sits with his wheel in a field of clay cups and sells a hundred of them for fifty paise. People drink tea out of his small clay cups on railway platforms and small tea-shops. His wife, known as Balkesar's mother, is a dark woman with a shrunken face and a shrunken body. Her sari is bright green, like the colour of the virgin fields and her eyes are liquid brown. Balkesar is a small boy with a round face and bright eyes. He left school and the fifth class to work in a paan field. He has six brothers and six sisters. They surround me in a potter's yard—small, shrunken people with bright

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black eyes. 'You are our guest,' says the potter's wife placing me on a charpoy in the sun. She sits at my feet, takes my hand in her hands. They are thin and scaly. Probably because of the work in the fields, I tell myself. 'Why have you come here? There is nothing in our village. What can we give you? There is no food. No kerosene oil. All the rations go to Patna. We wait in queues for days. Then the baniya tells us there is no grain. We eat leaves and roots. Sometimes we can't even get those. At times we do not wash our mouths for two or three days lest we feel hungry. There is no rice, no wheat. Look at the children. They are so hungry.' She gazes at me with her liquid brown eyes and continues to hold my limp, cold hand. Her children sit around and stare. Their large, black eyes question. I have no answers.

I leave Bakarpur, Sonepur and North Bihar. The journey back seems longer. I am in mid-Ganga, alone. The thin man is not on the deck to tell fortunes. Patna looms in the distance. It is twilight. The sky is a haze of blue, grey and rose. The waters are still except for the flutter of white gulls going home. Along the shore by the ghats there is a glow of flames and soft, black smoke. The dead are being burnt. As they were yesterday and the day before...

KHAJURAHO'S
*new temple has soft beds
and parking space*



It is just dawn. The light of the sun is gentle and warm. There is an imminent glow in the sky, a shimmer in the shallow pools, a waking glint in the eyes of a bull and a rustle in the old mahua trees. Khajuraho takes its own time to awaken.

But it is the 19th of November and one corner of Khajuraho is wide awake. A low white building with polished wooden doors and glass windows is alive with people and activity. A group of men, their heads tied with strips of cloth, squat in a circle, polishing tile floors. Their hands whirl in unison, their faces are hidden. A woman in a deep blue sari sweeps away clouds of dust from the entrance grounds. Her naked boy stumbles along as she moves on her haunches with a swaying broom. A blue and red shamiana has been unfurled and stuck under the old trees to house a gathering on old, metal chairs. On a slightly raised pedestal, are three brown rexine chairs and a table with a glass of pink flowers.

Not far away are other rows of tables covered with starched white cloths, in crisp readiness for the feast to come. In and out of the whitewashed building men move in a flurry. They look like types in a stunt film where the sequence is in fast motion. I do not know exactly what they are doing, but I know that they are all involved in the making of a grand set. The happening is to be an event in Khajuraho. For it is the opening of the Khajuraho Motel, the first of its kind in the land of the mahua trees. The Union Minister of Tourism is to cut the

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ribbon and declare the motel open. The Indian Airlines jet is to bring him down from Delhi, quite early in the morning and the little town is sloughing off its sleep and getting ready to receive him.

Trucks and vans seem to have suddenly arrived, filled with sombre-looking, khaki-clad policemen. With batons they saunter in the square to uphold order. Cars filled with officers, guides and chauffeurs, all sprucely dressed, race with urgency up and down the main road. I see one of them scream to a sudden stop. It is a white-uniformed chauffeur who opens the car door to shriek at a man in a striped pyjama. 'Wipe it well enough so that it sparkles,' he commands and buzzes off.

The man in the striped pyjama wipes on. It is a sign of the Tourist Office—neat white letters on a painted blue placard. The morning air is festive and expectant. A loudspeaker has begun to blare a haunting raga. It is the shehnai. By now, the town folk have arisen and are flocking out of their adobe huts to line the road across from the motel and get a glimpse of the visiting dignitary. He bears an extra importance for them for he has been a maharaja.

He arrives in a long blue car—a slim young man with a fair face and blazing black eyes. With a quick step he climbs up the slightly raised pedestal to address the crowd that has now assembled on the old metal chairs. Those who haven't earned a chair, stand behind them and beyond. The Minister's speech is short, crisp and warm. There is music in his words as he takes the crowd back to the era of the Chandolas who built the famous temples. He reminds them of the glory of their land. They clap with joy, acquiesce and disperse. Those who had formed the backdrop of the festivities also slip away—back to the village, to their huts, their tiny shops and their farms. Little do they realise that the shimmering new landmark has been raised only to perpetuate the splendour of the old, that which they have lived with all their lives.

What kind of an impact have the legendary temples had on their lives? 'None,' says the curator of the Archaeological

Museum. 'The people who live in Khajuraho village today are not of the same stock that built the temples. They have been living in the village probably for only two hundred years. Not a single one of them can sculpt or carve in stone. All they can do is make copies of Khajuraho figures in coloured plaster. But during Dussehra the potters make elephant figures and it is the same elephant one finds repeated in the friezes of the temples. Otherwise, they just live in the village and work on the farms or their small businesses. They are quiet, unpretentious people whose lives go on apart from the splendour that once was. The temples are just a natural part of their lives. What will probably affect them is this motel and tourism.'

I listen to him and wonder if the natural part of one's life is not an important part. Isn't it this that forms one's vast, vital subconscious, lending certain bearings that stay throughout life? Nevertheless, I glean some truth in his statement as I remember the little urchin who had shrieked 'Hello' and the village shopkeeper and the rickshaw-wala who had insisted on speaking to me in broken English sentences. I had detected in them a naive pride in their knowledge of the English language. Or was it merely a secret desire to identify and relate to a world which they deemed bigger and more beautiful—a world which was far beyond their reach but was now getting closer, as an airline jet arrived and departed every day.

I meet a young pujari boy with large, limpid eyes who seems to forge a link between today and the three hundred thousand days that have preceded the temple where he worships. He visits the Mantageshwar temple every morning to offer flowers—a bow of flaming marigolds and roses. He sits on the large circular granite altar spooning out the sacred water and offering divine flowers to the worshippers. He is not yet the temple-pujari; just a standby for his father. But he knows the ritual and performs it in the manner of a seasoned pujari. He tells me about the temple, about Shiva, the God of the temple and about the sculptures that adorn the temple walls. He likes them, he says, looking straight into my eyes. 'They are better

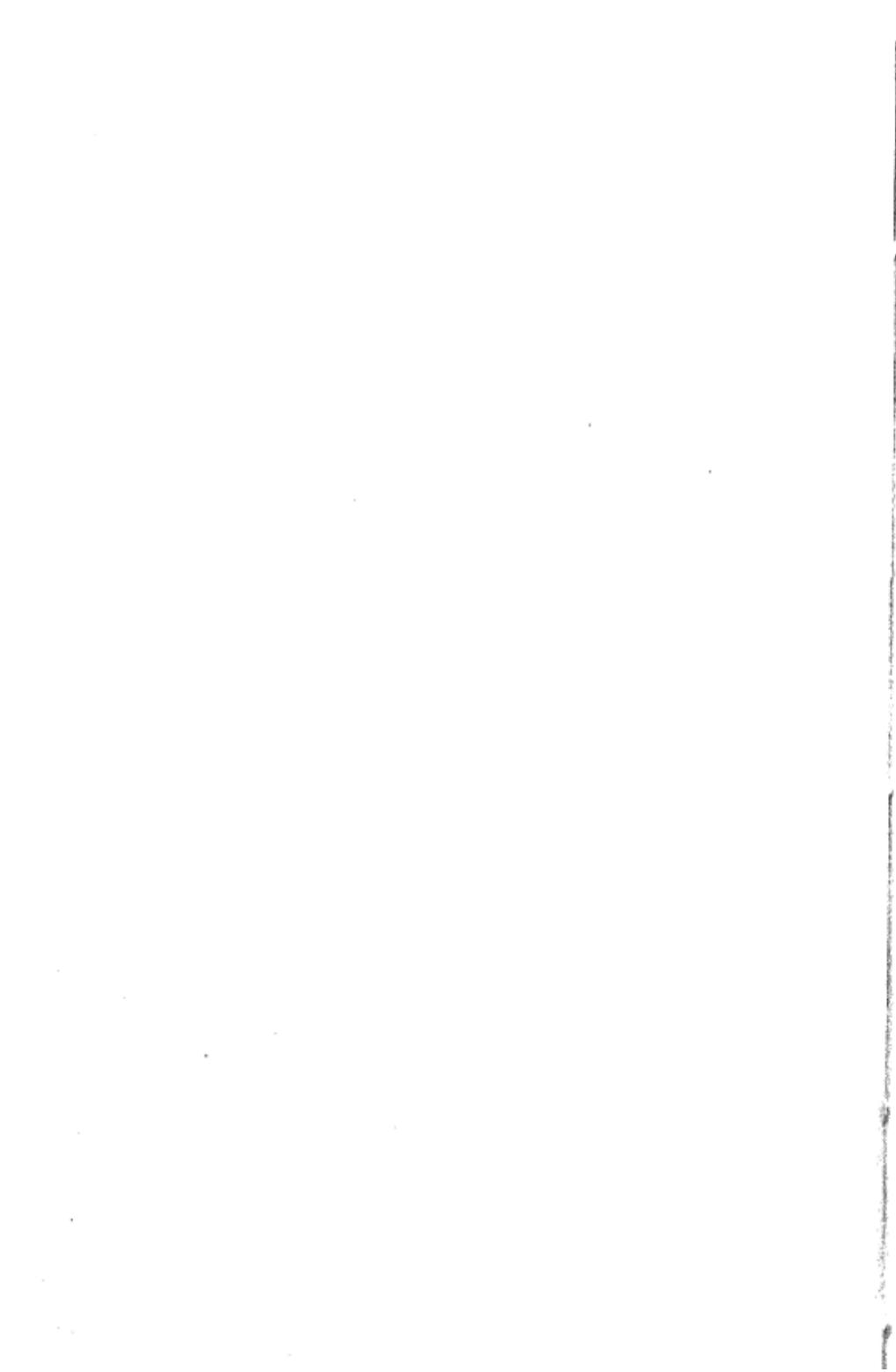
then the people of today. But they are the creations of an artist's imagination,' he explains. He clangs the temple bell and walks down the steps with me. But in the yard he talks of other things—of his school in Chattarpur, of his studies in biology, chemistry and English, of his dreams of becoming an engineer, of the Indian movies and of *Pakeezah* whose heroine finished the film and then died. He insists on saying goodbye in English before he runs back to the temple. I see him once again clang an old bell and recede into the inner space that he jealously guards for his father, for himself and for the generations that will come after him.

Leaving him, I wander over to the cluster of the 'Western' group of temples that stand amid green gardens. I do not meet any pujaris in them—just the wide-eyed tourists who silently walk around them, stare and pay a mute tribute. Pigeons coo in the niches of the ancient 'shikaras.' But for their staccato calls, there is silence and serenity. There are no flowers and incense here and no bells to ring. But the walls stand sturdy and alive with a profusion of human motions that gave them life and rhythm eleven centuries ago.

That was the time of the Chandala Kings, when Khajuraho had more trees, more lakes and a life-style that is now only understood in awe and bewilderment. Who were all the men who cut these massive stones, carved and refined them to tell a thousand tales—no, not alone of love but of war, of work and play. In row after row, I see their creations. Seated on elephants the men go to war; armed to the hilt they struggle with demons and then bow in togetherness before the pantheon of gods. Bejewelled like the women—amorous eyes, dancing feet and bodies taut with grace, in repose and readiness to give, to receive and to share the life of their men. Integrated in these sculptures I find an entire span of life chiselled out with a warmth, a humanity and a directness that appeals and baffles. As the sun climbs higher above the brown scrubby land I see them lit—shy maidens and lovers, warriors, musicians and others, playing out a larger-than-life pageantry in stone.

Khajuraho

In the riot of imagery I detect an orderliness, a harmonising unity where there is a place for everything in the scheme of life; love, pomp and splendour, music and dance, gods and their consorts, angels, demons and animals. For these, I realise, are not mere temples of worship but monuments to a way of life that was in itself a religion. I leave the temples, marvelling at the spirit of the men who sculpted out a whole world for the sheer joy of it. I return to the motel and to its own flurry of motions. Will this be Khajuraho's new temple and will it be able to perpetuate some of the joy which Khajuraho knew eleven centuries ago?



ORISSA
at the rim of infinity



Somewhere towards the east, the sun rises and begins a day that is not very different from the thousands of days that have preceded it. There is something special about the sun here, they say. When the sun rises, it dispels darkness. Everyone celebrates—the humans, the animals and the kings. The place is Orissa-shy—sultry and sonorous—peopled by the sun, the sea and the wind, stretching out in part, circled by the Bay of Bengal.

In the thirteenth century, a king celebrated his victory in war by raising a monument here—to Surya, the Sun God. It came to be known as the temple of Konarka—Kona, meaning 'corner' and 'arka' meaning 'sun.' The sun is supposed to rise in Konarak in one angular direction. One day in February every year, thousands of pilgrims come here to see the sun and bathe in the sea. It is here again, they say, where Sambe, son of Lord Krishna, worshipped the image of the Sun God, had a bath in the river, Chandrabhaga, and was cured of a disease that he had incurred through the wrath of the gods. And so grew the legend of the sun as a healer of diseases. The river is now only a pool by the sea at Konarak. But pilgrims come and bathe, stare at the sun as it rises, offer oblations and return with 'sunnier' bodies and minds.

'The temple of Konarak is the pride of Orissa,' declares 'Professor' Brahma, my guide. He is a lean, wiry man whose name is reminiscent of characters in Hindu mythological tales. He is a scholar of Oriyan history and literature, an orator who

When a place becomes a person

keeps thousands spellbound, and a VIP tourist guide, he tells me. I find him a speedy, talkative man with a voice that rasps, hums and spells out Oriyan legends in elongated, classical terms.

'The temple of Konarak as it remains today rises to 70 metres in height. Designed as a mythical chariot of the Sun God, it rests on 12 gigantic wheels. It was built by 1,200 architects in 12 years' time and 12 years' revenue of the state was invested in it,' he claims as I walk behind him, peering at the magnificence of a world of stone that is slowly being scarred by a harsh, saline breeze, by vandal tourists who scratch their names on marble gods and by the unthinking earnestness of a Government Department that has started to colour the ancient stone, a gory pink. 'Professor' Brahma shrieks concern : 'The glory of Orissa is at stake!'

'We can build many more Konarakas. All the craftsmen are still here but they are selling peanuts,' mourns Raghunath Panigrahi, who with his dancer-wife lives in a small white house on a sleepy street in Bhubaneshwar. Not too far away from their house is the Raja Rani temple. 'I go there often. It inspires me,' says Sanjukta, her deer-like eyes gleaming in the afternoon langour. 'Watching the temple sculptures is like attending a practical dance lesson. The tribhang (the three-bend posture typical of the Odissi dance) is most beautifully preserved in this temple. But dance as it must have been in those centuries is no more. Only the monuments remain. The devadasis who dance in the temples have disappeared. Some of them are still believed to be living in the Puri area... But they do not dance. Some of us, who do, have to go out of Orissa to find an audience. There is no interest and no patronage of the arts in Orissa. Artists languish here. The Chau dancers are now pulling rickshaws.' And the devadasis are probably selling vegetables, I tell myself.

In crumbling dance halls of temples
philosopher goats browse the noon
to the echoes of devadasis nupur...

Lines written by Bhubaneshwar's young poet, Sitakant Mahapatra. His passion is poetry and his profession is to serve the Government. What is it like living in Bhubaneshwar, I ask him.

'It is like living in a big abandoned palace where kings and emperors have once lived. Here was fought the great Kalinga War that changed the life of a king and a nation, and here lie the ruins of Khandagiri and Udaygiri Caves, where left in friezes, are scenes of life as it was lived 2000 years ago. Living against the backdrop of such a history, one cannot escape a sense of mellow tragedy, a feeling of being haunted. The grandeur of the past makes our activities seem minuscule. We have descended in air-conditioned caves and are living in emptiness...'

The sky's bird-pond grows empty
gods browse the long noons;
and history glistens
at the rim of infinity.

Empires

Bhaumas, Kesharis, Gangas, Kharavela, Ashoka
Confined by bitter asphalt;
millions of twittering words
sinking as corpses in the inflated dark wombs
of miles glazing as rivers;
miles of alphabet
on conveyor-belts of grey newsprint
Vanishing into the void.

Mahapatra recites formally, gazing reverently through heavily rimmed glasses. We are seated in the presence of Nimamani Senapati, the last of the grand line of Orissa's civil servants. He is seventy-five, a tall man with delicate, silvery hair, gentle eyes and an alert presence. After thirty-four years of service he now lives in gracious retirement in a rambling grey house in a village, apart from the business of Bhubanesh-

war. Around him is a coterie of faithful servants—a cook who has been with him for the last twenty-six years and an ayah, a frail, dark woman with wobbly, black teeth who calls herself 'Orgy.'

'Her name really is Rougi,' explains Senapati with a smile. 'She can't pronounce her R's.'

Rougi is an adivasi of the area, who, in her native tradition, prefers not to wear a blouse. Living in the Senapati household, she has learnt to wear one occasionally. Her sixteen-year-old daughter has not. She moves around the house after sunset like a sinewy black nymph, carrying an incense-burner and stirring the perfumed smoke in the air to drive away the mosquitoes. And then there is a young man with an ochre towel tied around his waist with ornate white marks on his forehead, breast and arms. A priest in the house?

'Yes, he was given to the temple. But here he drives a car.'

Later in the day, when Senapati offers to take us for a drive around the village, I find the priest-like man in a chauffeur's garb, trousers, bush-shirt, wristwatch and all, manoeuvering a vehicle through the trackless Senapati grounds. I see his farm, his cow called Gauri and the rest of the sleepy village. 'The village is about a hundred years old,' Senapati tells me. 'It is known as Brahmeshwarpatna, for here is the famous Brahmeshwara temple. It is a village of about five hundred people.'

Senapati's is the only large brick house in the village. Across from him lives the *gwala*. Next to his, is a pakka house that belongs to a clerk who works in the new secretariat. And next to him lives the priest who looks after the Brahmeshwara temple. Besides the cluster of temples and the thatched houses, the village also has a rice-husking mill which is always crowded with women. Urchins scream at each other during the day, the cows return from the pastures at sunset and at night, dogs yell and moan in the dark.

'They are all a part of my days,' says Senapati. 'I know the time of sunset from the sound of the cowbells. And the sunrise is big and bright across from my window. But when there is a mist, I do not see it. I am almost blind, nearly deaf and my nerves have lost all control,' he continues, leading me up to his roof terrace to see the landmarks of his native city. He studies each step with his big torch before he climbs on to the terrace.

'I can see a pink haze and some lights too,' he says, looking into the sunset. 'Straight ahead of you is the Buddhist Pagoda built by the Japanese in 1971. At the foot of its hill is an inscription of Ashoka dating back to 258 B.C. It gives instructions to the officers on how to behave with the population. 'Treat the forest people as my children,' it says. 'Do not punish without trial.' But nowadays preventive detention is a law and an act of Parliament,' he says, lowering his voice to a plaintive whisper.

In the near distance, soaring gently above the empty spaces, is the Brahmeshwara temple.

'That was built in 1060 A.D. by Queen Kalavati, mother of King Udyot Kesare, who built the famous Lingaraj Temple at Bhubaneshwar. The Queen left an inscription in which she proclaims that she is building a temple to Brahmeshwara with a garden all around and with devadasis to dance in the temple hall. That stone slab with the inscription was taken away by the British to Calcutta and never returned.

'The other structure in the distance is the Bhaskareswara Temple,' he continues, pointing his torch in another direction. 'It is really not a temple but a temple-like structure built around a broken pillar. The origin of the pillar is not known but relics found in the neighbourhood point to Buddhistic origins. The priests now treat it as a linga, put a few flowers around it to get some paisas. The Pandas are ruining the Indian culture.'

I meet some of them when I arrive in Puri to visit the temple of Lord Jagannath. They rush out in a cluster to usher me in but soon scatter, casting strange glances. I am not to enter the temple as I am not a Hindu. From a distance, a Panda makes

silent gestures. He wants money — to bless me with prasad from the temple, I am told. When I turn down his godly offer, he screws his lips and mumbles: 'Go and see the beach then.'

I accept it as a consolation and withdraw. In one of the back-streets of the temple called Chitrakarashi, I meet an old man with sunken cheeks. He is older than all the Pandas I have just met. He is a *pattachitrakar* who has been painting the images of his native gods for more than fifty years. He spreads out a *chattai* in his mud-plastered verandah and opens before me a mass of scrolls—paintings of gods and their consorts in all the brilliant colours of the earth. He sells me one at a very modest price and bows with an open smile. 'A pilgrim soul,' I tell myself as I leave him and drive away through the fervour-ridden streets of a great pilgrim city that had failed to draw me in.

In the temple city of Bhubaneshwar, there are more Pandas, more denials. The temple of Lingaraj is forbidden ground for me. But I walk around the massive structure, vainly trying to understand its life from its soaring facades. Around it I find other temples, smaller and crumbling. No Pandas stop me from gazing at the abandoned gods. I wander in and out of them through the long noon. In some of them, I find a flower or two resting at the feet of a statue or a clump of red vermilion smudging its face. Otherwise, they are silent, tranquil and deserted.

Their brooding presence keeps the ancient symmetry of a city alive. Their lost fervour is a reminder that times have changed and that to live with change is to be alive. In the distance, lie the shimmering structures of the new city—an airport, the State Secretariat, the State Assembly, the State Museum, the State Library and a number of large and small square buildings, painted a garish pink and grey, hailing a new era in the city of temples.

Away from the old and the new, away from the temples, Pandas and pilgrims, is the other world of Orissa, the world of the sea and the people who live around it.

A vast blue sea, the surf white and foamy, the sun golden warm and steadfast and all over, the bone-white sand, a number of clean, black men. Some of them wear conical cane-caps fitted around their heads. But that is when the sun is high and hot. They are the fishermen of Gopalpur, lords of a world where others seem like intruders. Some of them sit in a cluster, chuckling, playing cards. Some of them weave nets. Some of them sit by the side of upturned boats, some talk to each other and some sit singly, looking at the sea.

‘There is no fish today,’ they say. ‘When there are no seagulls, there are no fish.’

And when there are no fish, there is time to weave nets, to play cards, to gather shells and sell, to take new swimmers to the sea or just sit and look at it. And when there is no fish, there is no money and no food for that day. ‘But someone or something always comes along.’ There is always the sea...

Is it always blue and beautiful?

‘Yes, it is always beautiful but not always blue,’ says a tall, lean fisherman in a weathered voice. He has come to coax me to go to the sea, to swim and to pay him for his food, for there is no fish that day. ‘You should have seen it a few months ago when we had the cyclone,’ he narrates, as if it were a story. ‘It was black for days. The wind blew strong and hard and the sand piled up to my shoulders. The wind tore off the trees, the roofs and broke a lot of our boats.’

‘Look at the Morning Glory,’ says Madame Lusk, beaming like a shy young girl at the sight of a mauve-blue flower, half-open on an arched creeper. ‘It is the first to bloom since all the flowers died in the last cyclone.’

Amid her neatly combed black puffs is poised a yellow daisy. It is like a crown, radiant under the chiffon-white scarf that drapes her head and blows carelessly over her round shoulders. She seems like a woman in her fifties, short and stocky when she stands on her strong, plump ankles. But when she sits across from me by the open window, talking of the big and small happenings that fill her everyday life, she seems like a woman

much younger in years. Her pudgy face is pleasant and her small, dark eyes radiate naughtiness and gaiety—the kind that one associates with a medieval coquette.

Her name is Hermione Lusk. She came from Vienna many years ago and she has been mistress and keeper of Palm Beach Hotel for the last twenty years. She is known with a smile as the 'Duchess of Orissa.' They all know her—the local politicians and bureaucrats, the railway clerks, the shopkeepers of Gopalpur and the surroundings, the travellers who come regularly and those who just pass by.

'Aren't you very much a part of Gopalpur?' I ask.

'I am not, I am not,' she tells me in a girlish voice. 'Living here is like living in a fort. I am involved in the life of those who live in the village and yet I am apart from them. The hotel has meant a great deal to them. It has given them a livelihood. They come to me if they need something or to seek my advice or just to show me their new clothes. Tomorrow is a big festival in the village. The fishermen call it Pongal. Others call it Makara Sankranti. Boys become Makara friends by giving each other Makara rice.'

'The other kind of friendship, common among girls, is on the last new-moon night, when unmarried girls give each other mango blossoms and become baiela friends. The reason why a married woman cannot become a baiela friend is that she devotes her entire life to her husband. She cannot share it even with another woman friend. All of them, men, women and children, will come tomorrow dressed up to show me their new clothes. I give them a little money, some rice and dal. I do this a few times a year during festival time. I do not like them to come and beg. It is better to give at a time that is happier.'

Today Gopalpur has its own telephone exchange, its own post office and a few taxis and other things. On the night before the day of the festival, I explore the street that is the village. Gopalpur's main street, a not-so-broad track of mud, is dotted with alpana—decorations of white lime and chalk laid out in front of the entrance doors of the clean, thatched houses.

It is almost midnight and the women are out, bent to the ground, spilling the white liquid into designs, each one a new form! At the corner paan shop that is lit with a tiny bulb, there are pink-and-yellow candies, cigarettes and brightly coloured pictures of gods and actresses. 'There are two other paan shops in the village,' the paanwallah tells me.

'What else?'

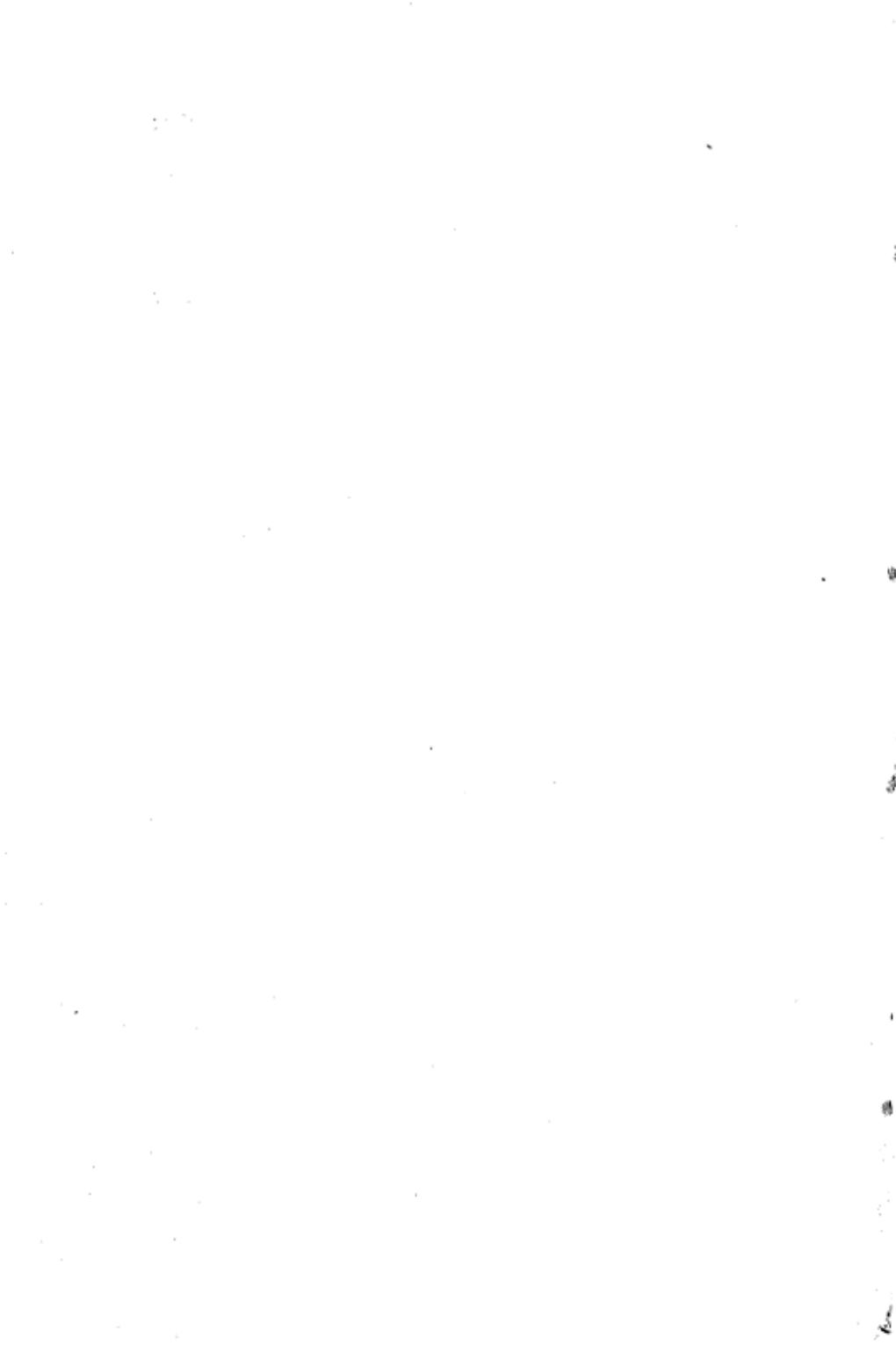
'There are about twenty tailors (they get good business during festival time), several coffee-shops, one with a radio; a cooperative weaving centre; three churches, a Protestant church, a Catholic church and a church of England; and three major temples, one for Shiva, one for Vishnu and one for Jagannath. The fishermen have their own god, their own temple.'

And how many worshippers? I wonder. The population of Gopalpur is about five thousand. Apart from the fishermen, others who live here are the local businessmen, the weavers and the halwais.

'It used to be a bigger and a livelier place before the big war,' says the tall fisherman with a cracked voice. He is now crouched on the sand and the sun has set. 'Big ships sailed from here to Burma and many of us got a lot of work in those days. But now the ships don't go to Burma. They say there is no money in Burma any more.'

'And Burma now is another country,' I tell him.

A shaft of light hits us and shoots across the sand. The headlight of a truck on the beach? My reflexes are sudden and I turn around with a slight shudder. 'It is only the light of the lighthouse,' he tells me mildly. 'Ships do not sail from here but the lighthouse continues to beam at night. Its long arms of light cast eerie shadows on the sand. It is as if the tall ghosts of forgotten voyages have returned . . .'



PUSHKAR
a mela in the desert



Giant wheels and merry-go-rounds, chintzy shops and sweet-meat shops, balloonmen and magicians, 'bander ka tamasha' and 'Bombai ka tamasha!' That was the way a mela was when I was young with wondrous eyes and Hyderabad was still a tidy little place. Years have passed. Melas have become bigger. And so have places.

When the moon becomes a full yellow circle and the air picks up the cold November nip, the desert town of Pushkar awakes and turns festive. It is time for the annual mela. Temples are lit by strings of electric lights, oil lamps prayerfully lit float on the lake after sunset, saints and sadhus smeared in ash and sandal gather under ancient trees, and the stepped ghats hum with the fervent oblations of many people.

When there is a mela in Pushkar, the winding cobbled streets lose their narrowness, the white terraces of houses, long since desolate, are crowded with red and yellow turbans and, on trellised balconies, women hide behind brilliant veils and stare. Beyond the lake, the town, on distant sand dunes, stand groups of big and small camels bringing back vague, unconnected memories of Lawrence of Arabia.

Arriving in Pushkar, I see a procession of men and women like organised school-children marching up the hilly path in a long straight line, blazing the arid trail with the colours of their brilliant garments. I marvel at their order, their passivity. How different they seem from those who crowd the melas in big towns and big cities. Lost amidst them I am not afraid.

They look at me directly, smile and show a curiosity which is natural and friendly. Here I see big Rajput men with rugged, gentle faces. They wear bulbous turbans of red and yellow. Some wear watches. Some carry transistor radios. They come to trade in camels and horses. I see a group of them huddled in the courtyard of a temple listening to the village Pradhan. 'You mustn't change your ways, your clothes,' he tells them, 'you must find for yourselves a worthy livelihood. Otherwise you will be no better than the Banjaras!' A few old heads nod at each other in agreement. The Pradhan repeats his plea several times and walks away unceremoniously. They continue to sit in the sun-filled courtyard. Outside the temple, a group of women in red, black and yellow skirts surround me, ask questions. Why don't you cover your head? Why don't you wear jewels? Where is your husband? Where did you buy your shawl and for how much? I try and answer them with as much directness as possible. Their laughter is like the chirping of birds, they jingle their jewels and go away. I see more of them in groups of reds, yellows and blacks, walking around the lake chanting plaintive hymns to Lord Brahma who came to Pushkar long, long ago. Freely they take their blouses off and bathe in the sacred waters. Lithely they move through the market place chewing sugarcane and, as night descends, they sit around the bonfires singing and cooking large chapatis. They do not baffle me. I understand them in spite of their jewels, their skirts and their veils.

When there is a mela in Pushkar there are also other people. I see a good number of them from faraway places walking around with stunned looks, clicking cameras. I also see others, more pernicious invaders, young men from small towns, dark glasses, tight trousers, brilliantined hair and all. Their faces are nondescript, their manner is slimy. They push their way through brashly, pass vulgar comments and laugh loudly as villains do in Hindi films. In the Bazaar, I find an old man at the end of a crowded street. He winds a multicoloured machine with a large fan-like horn. It is a gramophone and the

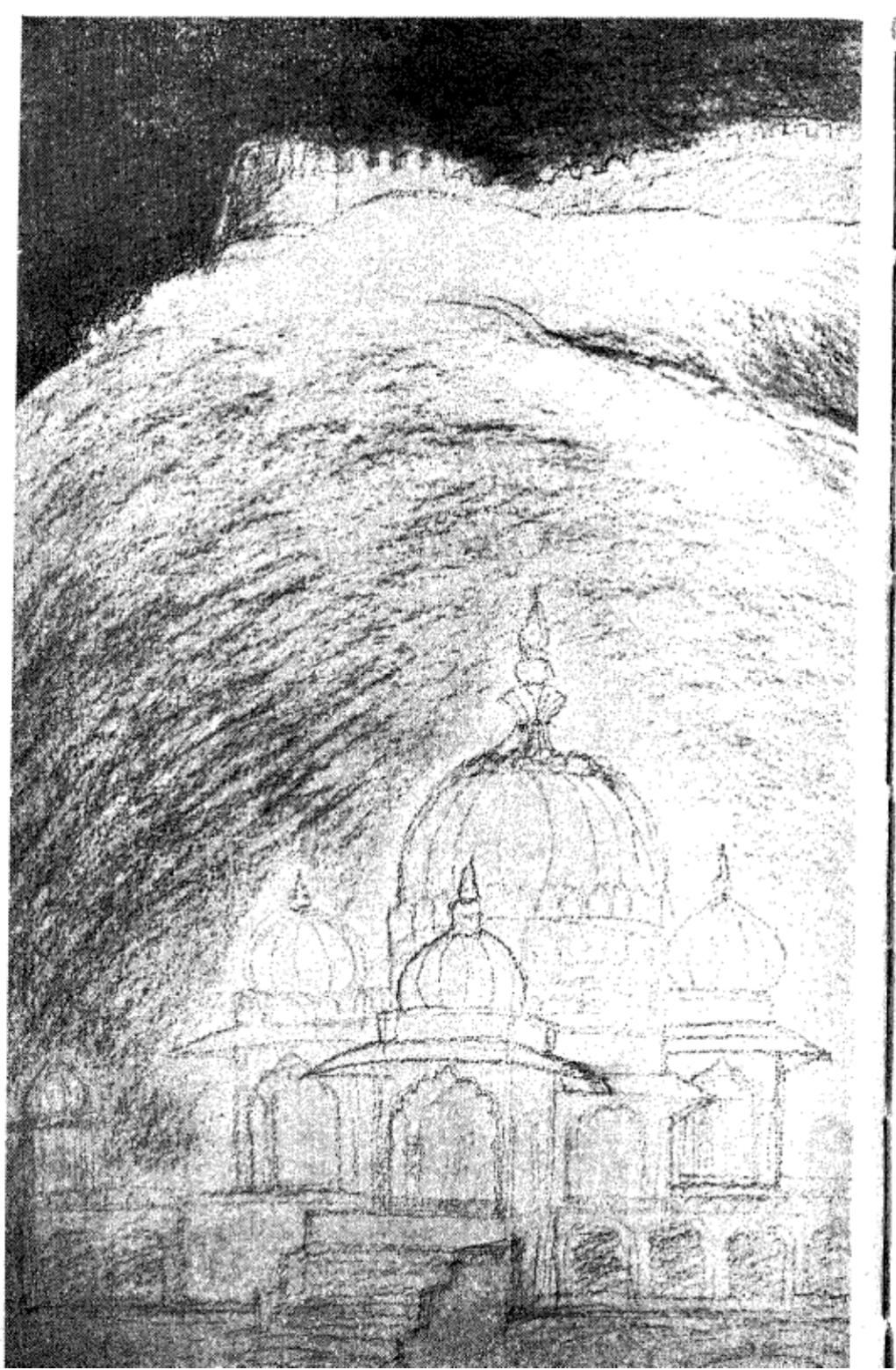
saint, cracked voice of the singer is that of 'Noor Jahan'—a forgotten number by a forgotten singer. But the tamasha I see through the small round glass, is that of today—splintered images of Rajesh Khanna, Sharmila Tagore, Dilip Kumar and Indira Gandhi. I am probably his first customer, I presume, as I give him a rupee and see a glint in his eyes. Ahead is a big crowd gathered in front of a tent-like stage. Their eyes are focussed on a short, dark man wearing a pink felt hat. He makes obscene gestures and whirls a sari-clad eunuch around. The eunuch giggles and sings a song from *Bobby*. The song dies off amidst other sounds. The persistent hum of the crowd resounds in my ears.

Returning, I almost stumble over a sadhu lying on a bed of brambles, his tongue pierced with a nail. I give him a coin. No, no, he nods from his bed of thorns. I want a rupee, he gestures, raising one finger. Is he a religious man? Why has he come to Pushkar? And what about those young dandies? And the eunuch and the man in the pink felt hat? If more of them continue to come, other things will come with them. Probably a giant wheel, a merry-go-round, magic-men and balloonmen.

And then, the mela in Pushkar will be like any other mela, anywhere...



RAJASTHAN
splendour in the past



Out in wildernesses of their own, up on a hill, in an isolated valley, in the middle of a lake, they still remain—the palaces, the forts and the temples of yesterday's Rajasthan, melancholy reflections of some who are dead and some who still survive, isolated from the grandeur that they once helped create.

Founded in 1567 by Maharana Udai Singh, Udaipur is often described as rising up from the turbulent annals of the middle ages, 'a monument to the unconquerable spirit of the Rajputs.' In the winter of 1972, Udaipur exists as a dusty white city of shanty streets and crowded bazaars, of small white houses with elephants, horses and warriors painted on white-washed walls. It is also a city of temples, some desolate, some alive with flowers, incense, music and crowds. It is a city of gardens with green grass and fountains; of lakes with island palaces and of people who wear brightly coloured clothes, make exquisite toys in wood, ride camels on endless sands and sing songs of deathless love and gallantry.

I begin my visit to Udaipur in the Lake Palace Hotel—a king's fantasy turned into an abode of marble in the middle of a lake. It seems unreal—the dapple of waters, the cooing of pigeons, with yet a strange silence. The waters of the lake shine in the sun and cause reflections to shudder on the white ceilings of the royal rooms. They are rooms with different names to suit the moods of the day, the seasons of the year and the whimsical desires of kings and queens. Khush Mahal is the

When a place becomes a person

abode of happiness, Kamal Mahal is the lotus palace, Sharad Purnima is the terrace of the full moon, Sandhya Nivas is the sunset room, and Rang Mahal is the palace of colour. Mine is called Varsha Nivas, the suite for the rainy season, designed to enjoy sky-darkened, monsoon days. However, it is February. The sky is blue, without a cloud, and the waters of Lake Pichola are sky-blue, green-blue, golden-blue and steel-blue. Pelicans and parrots fly in circles above the waters and the boatman takes me for a ride as the sun sets.

'Once you drink the waters of Lake Pichola you always come back,' he tells me, smiling shyly. 'This was used during the festival of Gangore,' he says as he stops his motor launch by a long blue boat covered under an old piece of burlap. The boat has a high seat and delicate arches painted over it. 'The Maharaja used to sit up there and ride with the deity in this boat at the time of Gangore. People used to gather around the shores of the lake to watch the festival of boats. The Maharani would sit in the white pavilion yonder and the nobles in the balconies of their homes, as the boats passed them by. There would be showers of flowers, fireworks and the salute of guns as the Maharana left his palace and again when he landed on the ghats.'

Has he seen the festival, I ask him.

'Yes,' he answers eagerly, his dark eyes brimming with nostalgia. 'I used to be one of the fourteen boatmen employed by the Palace for many years. The Maharana looked after me and my family. I had no cares in those days.' Now the boatman is old and has a leathery face. He takes the guests of the Lake Palace Hotel in a motor-boat and earns a monthly salary. He occasionally silences the noise of his launch to comment on the sights around—the cliff-like walls on the ridge of the shore; the Maharana's Palace, an imposing mass of granite and marble crowned with airy cupolas; adjoining it, the Rajmata's Palace, the one with the tiny windows—'we can't see anything but she can see us.'

The boat slowly glides around by the ghats where women

bathe in the last light of the sun, circles the island of the birds and fishes and slowly comes to a halt at the isolated island of Jag Mandir where stand a row of black marble elephants, their trunks raised in joyous unison. 'The monument on this island looks like a temple but it is not really one,' the boatman tells me as he escorts me through ornate empty halls of the abandoned stone building. 'It was made to look like a temple to deceive the Mughal Emperor Jehangir, whose son, Prince Khurram, had fled from Delhi and was taking refuge here. How could a Muslim prince live in a Hindu temple? They never found out.'

We walk silently into the circular room carved in coloured marble, where the Mughal prince is believed to have lived for a while. It was then that he had dreamed of building a structure, later to be known as the Taj Mahal. Today a gardener lives on the island looking after roses, wild pink bougainvilleas and a huge variety of vegetables that are used in the Palace Hotel kitchens. Occasionally, an artist from a foreign land comes to sit in the solitude to make sketches. People still talk of a playwright from London who had visited the island several years ago. He was staying at the Lake Palace and was writing a play. His name was John Osborne.

The Durbar Hall of the Lake Palace dazzles in the mosaic of mirrors and blue and green tiles that were studded more than a hundred years ago for the pleasure of a king. The royal enclosure with the throned chair is vacant. It is now the Palace Bar.

A man with streaked grey hair and a close-cut beard saunters through with a glass of brandy in one hand and a black cigarette holder in the other. He is Hugh Davenport, a native of Britain who has been living in India since 1927. In Udaipur he tends the royal gardens and plays impresario to the local artists. In a clipped British accent, he comments about the India that he has known. 'It is really rather a blessing that under the old treaties there were parts of India that did not come under the direct dominance of the British. The result is that in the better-run States one still finds strong traditions that really belong to

old India. Rajasthan is typical in many such ways. The habits of the people, the way they dress and eat is in direct line with ancient India. If the department of Public Works had come in, Rajasthan would be something else today.

'I welcome the initiative that has been shown by the great princes,' he continues in the manner of a seer. 'They were wise enough to see the light. Some of them joined politics, others turned their palaces and pavillions into hotels and guest houses. His Highness of Udaipur has a wonderful eye for architectural beauty, inherited no doubt from thirteen and a half centuries of the dynasty of which he is a part. His effort to utilise the Lake Palace and make it available for foreign visitors, is a great step. In any case, with the loss of revenue and the kingdoms, all these palaces would have gone to ruin. Now they belong to posterity.'

On the terraced balcony of his ancestral home, Maharana Fateh Singh of Udaipur sits in a brown woollen coat. His leather shoes gleam in the afternoon sun. The khaki curtain behind him flaps noisily in the wind. 'Would you like to sit in the sun or shade,' he asks me in a soft, polite voice. I prefer to sit in the shade leaving him to the sun. There is a touch of grey in his hair and little of the grandeur that one associates with princes.

He summons a yellow-turbaned servant and orders tea. It comes in a silver tray—simplified silver service with delicate gold-rimmed china cups. On a small solitary plate rest a group of biscuits with blobs of yellow cream. 'It is a very simple tea,' he tells me, 'but the cakes are good.' His friend, a local lawyer dressed in a black coat and a white bow-tie sits primly in a third chair and pours out the tea. It is weak and milky, but the Maharana has made it easier for me to accept it having already explained that it is 'a humble tea—the kind of tea that any old charwoman would serve one in New York.' But she would not have the exquisite silverware, I say. 'The silverware may not be there but what is the thing they are using out there these days?' he asks, looking wistful. 'Yes, stainless steel. Probably that

costs more in America than silver costs here. If I were to buy these things now, I don't think I would be able to. I just could not afford them.'

The crows caw and fly past us. The sun has set and they are returning to the deserted islands in Pichola to roost in the old trees. But the Maharana is a busy man. 'I wish I had thirty-six hours in the day to do all the things I would like to do,' he tells me in a brisk manner. 'We are constantly trying to find time to adjust ourselves. Changes are so fast. You cannot adapt yourself—not in a personal sense, but to the whole way of life. We are trying to make things smaller, compact and more efficient. That in itself is a whole-time job.'

The Maharana of Udaipur, the seventy-fifth ruler of the house of Mewar, a descendant of the Sun God, is an ordinary citizen of India as of January 1972. He has lost his privy purse, his title and all the other privileges including, in his case, a 21-gun-salute. For he is a Maharana, more exalted than the Maharaja. 'Naturally, I feel sorry about it' he says in no uncertain terms. 'Particularly the way it has gone.'

But the Maharana is busy, involved and alive to all that is happening around him in Udaipur. He does not belong to any political party. But all political parties trust him and come to him. He advises them and tells them what they need. 'People should decide what they want themselves,' he explains in a voice that has now acquired larger dimensions. 'I am trying to help the future powers to preserve democracy in our country.' Then, there are other interests for him—business commitments in Bombay, Rockwell International Inc., whom he represents in Asia; looking after a domestic staff of forty, and several palaces, the Lake Palace with its new partnership, the City Palace which now houses a museum, and his own palace where he lives in the seclusion of certain quarters, surrounded by miniatures, paintings, crystal chandeliers and the nostalgia of splendid days.

'The history of Mewar clearly refutes the western concept of the Maharajas. Our house has always been conservative.

When a place becomes a person

My father was a quiet and dignified man. As he had polio he could not move from his waist down. I was the first person in my family to move out of Udaipur, to go abroad, and even the first one to go to Delhi. I was also the first person to do anything outside the former State of Mewar. There have been warriors in our family outside the former State of Mewar. There have been warriors in our family who have become the legend of India but that warriorship has been greatly misinterpreted. They always say that there were quarrels between Hindus and Muslims. But this is greatly exaggerated and not always true. The fight was against anyone who invaded India. Even when the fight was against the Mughals, there were Muslims in our army fighting along with us as generals. Even till today there are first-class Muslim noblemen who enjoy the same dignity and respect from the Maharanas as other noblemen. Another unusual pattern in our house was that the seat of the heir-apparent was always below the noblemen. Even the Muslim nobility was seated above the Maharaj Kumar. We cherished a different kind of concept all along—a concept that was never communal, never caste-ridden. The Maharanas have always mixed freely with the people of the state and there has always been a free exchange of social customs. Even today we keep close contact with the humblest of the humble men who have had any connection with us. If there is a wedding in their home we send them a gift. If there is a death in the family, we go to visit them. At one time people made much about the depressed, the sweeper-class and the so-called "untouchables." All along in our family we had a tradition that on a holy day the Maharani would go and touch the feet of a sweeper-woman. Unless one knows all such details of rituals, one can't really appreciate them. We have always cherished the basic human qualities — a sense of dignity, a sense of self-reliance, a sense of independence and a pride in freedom.'

The Maharana sips his tea, talks with ease and watches the motor launches as they chug up and down Lake Pichola carry-

ing people with bags and cameras. 'The Lake Palace has been on the tourist map of the world for the last five years. Most people who visit India invariably come here. Compared to the more elaborate palaces in India, it is only a big house. If not for its architectural pattern and design, it would be like any private home. My memories of it are very few. I used to go there as a young boy to pay respects to my father. He lived there during the summer as the temperature on the island was ten degrees less than on land. But I never really lived at the Lake Palace. I decided to turn it into a hotel in 1963. Nobody wants the headache of such elaborate estates these days. What is the good of them?'

I detect little emotion in his voice as he brushes away the importance of his regal possessions. How does he feel about the ruins that still raise their heads from the arid landscapes of his former kingdom? Aren't they, in a way, anachronistic symbols of a glory that has passed? 'What is glory?' questions the Maharana. 'As far as I am concerned it is a tradition. Either you are proud of the tradition or you are not. As you give any historical incident the name of a tradition, it automatically implies that you are proud of it. Traditions are something that you are proud of. If you are not proud of them, they cease to be traditions.'

Away from the relics, beyond the placidity of Lake Pichola begins a long curved road going into the city, a dusty little place where live the people of Mewar, keeping a pace that has changed little with the going away of the Maharanas and the rough and tumble of the new politics. I see these people everywhere—the women in blazing swirls of skirts breaking stones to build roads. And the men, their faces sculpted under the huge red and orange turbans, riding camels, lurching in bullock-carts and pulling at lazy Persian Wheels to irrigate a waterless land. Then all the little boys, wearing the same turbans as their fathers, standing silent amid herds of goats under forlorn trees.

I meet one of them muffled in a sheet against a cold drizzle.

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He is twelve-year old Mahadev Singh who stops the car and wants a ride to Nathwada where he goes to school. Barefoot, he climbs into the car and sits back like a prince. His shirt and shorts are very dirty. He studies in the sixth grade. He walks to school every afternoon, four miles each way. In the mornings he fills water for his mother. His older brother sells milk in the afternoons and goes to school in the mornings. His father is a farmer. What does Mahadev Singh want to do? He doesn't know. But later he mumbles that he would like to be a doctor. His face is clean and candid, his eyes small and bright and his feet, weatherworn. I offer him a two-rupee note. 'No,' he says politely and gets down in the crowded bazaar. He is of good peasant stock, I tell myself. But no shoes on such a wet day!

Has the life of these people really changed, I wonder. 'Yes, it has,' says the Maharana. 'People now wear terylene, rubber sandals and drink tea three or four times a day.' In the hundred miles of country that I have travelled around Udaipur, the only signs of commercialism I see are the red and yellow posters for cigarettes—Bull Dog Bidis. The presence of the new government is pasted on the walls of ruined forts and palaces. Earnest slogans in big red letters urging family planning. Up at the impressive city gate, built by the Maharanas in the eleventh century, stands a board with a blue and black CEAT tyre. It seems small and funny amid the gentle hills and the vast valley.

The same CEAT sign stands along the rose-coloured granite road at the gateway to Amber, the mountain fort-palace, where ruled another line of brave Rajput rulers before they moved to Jaipur in the seventeenth century. Today, Jaipur is the capital of the State of Rajasthan, with picturesque hills, zig-zagged by fortress walls, crowned by cupolas and palace domes. 'I have seen Jaipur and now I can die,' wrote Max Lerner, a man who travelled around the world decades ago. He was referring to a city that was pink, 'in the tones of an autumn sunset,' spacious and delicately beautiful. I see little of the pink in Jaipur today. On its rose-pink walls are pasted posters of all

sizes, multi-coloured and multi-lettered, shrieking of the new goods and the new movies. 'In this part of the world people are still old-fashioned,' says the youngest son of the former Maharaja of Jaipur. 'Yet to them, anything new is good. They are happy putting a new sign and covering an old building with a bright new poster. They don't realise how difficult it is to bring back the old.'

'The beauty of Jaipur in olden days was something that is now almost unimaginable,' says the Maharani of Jaipur, a queen who stepped into politics to save the old walls of the city from being torn down by the new rulers. 'When I got married and came here, this city was a vision of beauty. Everywhere you looked there was a vista and something at the end. Today you look into nothing but posters, on the walls, on lamp-posts, everywhere. In our time, every year after the rains, the pink was applied to all the buildings. People nowadays do not adhere to the old laws and by-laws that have always governed the city. Everyone wants to be independent. Somebody paints his house bright green, another puts a modern facade in front of his house, ruining the harmony of the entire city structure. The city used to have the broadest sidewalks and boulevards. Now you can't walk on any of them, as they are littered with roadside stalls and garbage. This is all because of the lack of law and order in the state. The face of the capital reflects the government. It is untidy. The rulers of today are too frightened to do anything about it lest they lose their votes. I am a Member of Parliament and I have been fighting for this for a long time. But I can't do anything. Everything has to go through the cabinet. And they are not interested except in the votes that will let them stay in power. People are pilfering from the Amber Palace, something which never happened before. Everything in India is changing. The values are becoming more and more materialistic. Anybody who does anything wants to make money.'

In another century of pink and brown stone, one hears the echoes of the grand affluence that another class of people

indulged in not too long ago. One still hears awe-filled tales of princes and nobles and is escorted in and out of palaces where they lived and played—Palace of the Winds rising above the shanty business of Jaipur's main street; Palace of the Waters, in the middle of a lake where royalty rowed over to spend sultry summers; a palace to entertain, a palace for veiled queens whence they watched the life of the streets; a palace used as a hiding place for wayward kings; a palace of mirrors gleaming in a thousand points of light with one single candle flame—and many more with qualities that make up a medieval fairy tale. Rambagh Palace is not one of these. Once the hunting lodge of a Maharaja, designed for picnics and relaxation, it is once again being turned into a hotel. I am a guest at the Rambagh and my room is red, white and blue. The carpet is poppy red, the furniture is painted white and the cushions are royal blue. It is a happy room with the feeling of space and colour that one often sees in miniatures. Outside my triple-arched balcony are old mango groves. An occasional peacock struts solemnly, between the sun and shade. At night, there is silence, the faraway wail of jackals and the thin voice of a shepherd boy on his way home. Rambagh, in many ways, is still a palace, I tell myself. It is far from the sounds of the growing city. Its marble pillars are tall, ornate and sturdy, the kind that palaces have. Its arches are curvicular and rhythmical and its halls are long, airy and endless. I hear the sound of my footsteps as I walk through them.

'I see images of a crowded life,' says a visitor from Melbourne, sitting on Rambagh's roof terrace with a drink of Cinzano. 'I see lots of people cooking, serving, partying and having a grand time.' 'Yes, there were a lot of parties here,' says Rambagh's head waiter with a glint in his eyes. 'There are three-hundred servants in this palace, different servants for different chores—to polish shoes, to wait at tables, to pour water for washing hands, to hold the soap or the towel, or just be in attendance to the royal family. The Zenana or the ladies' section which was in the back portion of the palace had its own array

of women servants. The old Maharani's pleasure in the morning used to be carrot and pistachio halwa warmed in a silver bowl and served with her morning tea. She would never come out of her quarters into the outside area of the palace. When the Maharaja opened this beloved palace of ours as a hotel in 1957, it was a sad day for all of us. He was a great Maharaja. He died in his polo boots as he always wanted to. The Duke of Edinburgh was his great friend.'

I leave him and wander up the staircase to meet the royal hairdresser. He is a big man with a balding head and sad eyes. I peep into his salon and ask him if he can wash my hair. Just a minute, Madam,' he says politely. 'Let me check if there is hot water.' He bows away from my presence into an ante-room and returns immediately. 'Sorry, Madam, there is no hot water. But I can straighten your hair if you wish.' I am intrigued by his suggestion. How is he aware of this modern method of dealing with hair in this distant desert town? But I am curious and willing to accommodate. Besides my hair has turned frizzy in the drizzle. He starts methodically with an electric rod, the kind that one sees in big and bizarre salons in the western world. Where did he acquire such a handy instrument, I ask him. 'A countess from France gave it to me,' he says in a gentle whisper. 'She was a guest of the royal family and she was pleased with my work. I have been hairdresser to all the royal households in Rajasthan. I have also done the hair of Queen Elizabeth and Mrs Kennedy.' Straight-backed in a cane chair I listen to his roster of names. The drab little salon acquires an aura that seems unreal.

The story continues—of grand people and grand times. The Maharani of Jaipur elaborates on it in her own grandiloquent manner. I meet her in the Polo Bar of the Rambagh Palace surrounded by the trophies and momentos of her late polo-playing husband. She sits on a white sofa in a bottle-green chiffon sari. Her hair is down and brushed carelessly. She wears no make-up but she glows with the kind of good looks that beautiful women have when they decide to grow

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old beautifully. What was Rambagh like when it was her home?

'Rambagh, even though it is so big, has always been very like a home,' she tells me. 'Each of us had our suites and our things around. The family was very large. We always met for meals and in the mornings. My husband and I went out for a ride and the guests would go riding too. Then we would all have breakfast together, change and get down to our activities, especially my husband. Some of the guests would go sightseeing and some of us would play golf. We all met in the front verandah and had lunch together. After lunch, some of us would rest, some of us would go sightseeing again. Every other day there used to be polo. On non-polo days we would play tennis. During duck-shooting days we would go out for duck shoots. Then again we would meet in the evening. If it was summer time, it would be outside on the front lawn. We would dine outside. If it got hotter we would move down to the fountain. My husband used to be very fond of bridge. Sometimes he would go to the club in the evenings. Sometimes we would have bridge parties here. Of course the house was always full. The day when we were leaving Rambagh, I looked at the diaries that our ADC used to keep. From the day we arrived, till the day we left, there was always somebody staying in the house, a maximum of twenty to thirty guests and a minimum of two or three from India and different parts of the world. It was a very gay and happy atmosphere. We had a lot of parties—sometimes dances, sometimes fancy-dress parties, scavenger hunts, games and a lot of outdoor life; picnics at Takht-Shahi and celebrations at the City Palace. My husband was very strict that everything should have a correct decorum in the house. The staff was always beautifully dressed—the peons had their turbans on, the butlers were smartly attired and the ADCs wore their ascots and uniforms in the evenings. All told, it was very splendid, and yet a home.'

I listen to her and wonder how such a life could have survived as long as it did. 'That atmosphere is completely gone now,'

says the Maharani in a tone that is not mournful. 'In the beginning when I returned to Rambagh after it had become a hotel, it used to hurt me very much. Look at so-and-so throwing a cigarette on the lawn, I would point out to my husband. But he used to get annoyed and would remind me that it was no longer our home. With time, I got used to the idea.'

'My husband was far-sighted. He knew that a lot of changes were coming to India. Before, Rambagh was guarded by the soldiers of Jaipur State forces. The Palace had seven different entrances. My husband realised that it was impossible to keep it up in the way it had been kept. So instead of letting it go derelict, he turned it into hotel. He was so far-sighted! He retained his dignity. He knew that times were changing.'

And what about her? Hasn't she been far-sighted too, accepting the loss of her crown and getting into the new politics?

'It was the deterioration of Jaipur City that made me go into politics,' she announces. My whole picture of her as a politician changes. 'In 1958 they were knocking down the gates of the old city. I was not the Minister of Public Works and I could not stop it. So I wrote to Prime Minister Nehru and asked him to stop it. And then I entered politics to make my voice heard. Once I joined there was no end. But I don't think women should be in politics. A married woman should be with her family. At that point in my life, I was ignorant of the facts that made politics. I joined and I got involved. Today it is a different story. The concept of royalty and its rights is considered an anachronism. But still the people of Jaipur respect us and go all out for us. When my son got the national award after the last Indo-Pak war and was returning home, the people went all out on their own and built arches of welcome from the airport all the way to Amber Palace. How can the government de-recognise us? We belong to the state and we have ruled the state, not for two days but for centuries. If you de-recognise the present princes, then what about the Emperor Ashoka or Akbar? Can they de-recognise history? The Government of

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India had a sacred pledge with the princes and they have failed to honour it. The princes, who kept their part of the agreement and let India become one without any bloodshed, have been stripped of all their privileges. We are not spending all the money on ourselves as they think. We have so many institutions and people to look after. We have cut down on our way of life. Our palaces are gone, our private planes are gone, our army of servants is gone. But those who preach socialism, their standard of living is going up. As far as I am concerned it does not affect me in the least. My husband always warned me and I learnt to get used to the idea.'

It is almost midnight and the guests have withdrawn from the Polo Bar. It is past the closing hour but a few waiters are still gathered in a respectful circle. For the Maharani who reigned over them is still seated on the white sofa talking about her home and her once pink city. Her voice, soft, tonal, full of fervour, amused and angry by turns, grandly fills the quiet of the Bar. The only other sound is that of the one-spout fountain gurgling in the middle of the room.

Almost at the end of the desert, rising out of a tawny yellow landscape, is Jaisalmer. A fortress mounts the hill, alone, sombre and assertive. Royal chhattris are scattered, as if suspended in time. There are white tents in the sand, khaki-clad jawans in the streets and the metallic roar of army trucks sounding sinister in the stillness of a desert town.

What is special about Jaisalmer? I ask seventy-five year old Anuridh Singh, owner of Nathumull Haveli in the centre of town.

'Stone,' he tells me in a loud, rasping voice. He is old and deaf and feels he has to shout to make himself heard. His Haveli is an ornate, intricately carved structure with one-slab stone roofs and a seven-panel, brightly-chiselled stone facade.

It was Anuridh Singh's great-grandfather who built the Haveli one hundred and twenty-five years ago and finding it too precious a burden, offered it as a gift to the Maharaja, who again gave it back to him. It was almost the single-handed

creation of two brothers, Hothi and Lallu. It cost Rs. 15,000 to build, the wage of the stone-cutters being 15 paise a day.

'I can't even afford to get any repair work done these days,' mourns Anuridh Singh. 'There are few masons who can cut in stone in the manner of their ancestors. Even when they can, no one can afford to hire them. Few people living here have any money left.'

'Even our Maharaja does not have the money to complete the tombstone of his grandfather's cenotaph. Nor can he afford to build a cenotaph to commemorate his late father. Instead of a stone monument, there stand two pitchers of water on his Samadhi. A gardener in Bada Bagh performs puja and fills these pitchers with water. He has been doing this for the last fifteen years and will continue to do so until the monument is raised. At night, no one dares to enter the grounds, they say the late Maharaja is seen riding a white horse surveying the Bagh. He must find it parched and brown. There is no water in the fountains and there are no more picnics. If you ask anyone on the street who lives in these havelis today, they will tell you that the owners are all away. They have all gone to Jodhpur, Delhi or wherever there is business and money. I live here because I am old. My sons are away in Bikaner working for a Birla company. Once I go, there will be a lock on this door.'

'The history of Jaisalmer is tied to the yellow stone that is found in these parts,' he continues in the manner of a storyteller. 'Once upon a time Jaisalmer was on the route of trade caravans from Sindh. It enjoyed great prosperity in those times. The kings built entire cities of stone. The citizens raised noble havelis to live in. But when the railway line came to Jodhpur, Jaisalmer lost its splendour. Our late Maharaja refused the British Resident's offer to let the train come into the city. He was afraid that it may spoil the people and take away from them their innocence and their religion. Since then the people started getting poorer...'

Today, among the nine-thousand inhabitants of Jaisalmer,

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I find a lot of urchins in dust-filled alleys and old people browning in the sun in Gopa Chowk. Groups of women in bright-coloured garments stand with clenched eyes in the presence of ornate deities that adorn the temples in the fort. In and out of the labyrinth of stone columns, I see yellow-robed priests, a cloth tied over their noses, moving in a slow ritualistic pattern, cleaning and wiping the marble gods with tattered pieces of cloth. Stray young shepherds keep a silent vigil on flocks of black goats that graze diligently on parched earth. Camels scornfully look at them and move away to the kikar and the cactus. And young men in bright red turbans hack away at the legendary yellow stone--this time to build a tourist bungalow.

I find a lean man in a frayed black coat being ushered into a Government office. 'There is no grass for my cows. They are dying slowly.' The Chief Minister will be in town today. 'Will he arrange some fodder for my cows?'

The tailor at the Khadi Parishad Shop exhibits a jacket of the local wool that he has sewn himself. He breaks into a toothless grin and folds his hands together. 'Please ask them in Delhi to give us water. That is all we want. It hasn't rained for a long time in my village. Children born during the last ten years do not even know what rain is.'

While visitors sit around buying shawls of flaming pink and blue the tailor offers them glasses of water. In Jaisalmer, a guest is not offered tea or a Coke but a glass of water. For that is the most precious commodity.

'You have to live here to realise the gravity of the problem,' a local officer tells me. 'A person has to walk ten miles to get a pitcher of water.'

I detect a note of dismay in his voice. But he seems as helpless as the toothless tailor and the fodderless man in the frayed black coat. All he can do is to listen to their woe-filled tales and pass on their abridged versions to others who live miles away and decide the destinies of a waterless land.

I leave Jaisalmer, marvelling at the very existence of this city

Rajasthan

and those who live in it. They continue to live and smile in spite of the cloudless skies, in spite of an embittered sun and in spite of the endless sands that have made their land a desert.

KASHMIR
reflections



A leaden, grey blanket of mist fills the window frame. The mountains have disappeared in the distance taking away my perspective. The lake has lost its blue, its moving reflections. The geese that towed in a line have scattered. The fisherman in the long boat has gone home. The patter of rain is persistent as if it will never still, never fade. There are no other sounds, no birds nor human voices. We are in Kashmir in a houseboat made of wood. Heavy mist surrounds. Inside on the painted white walls are pictures in small frames of people who seem of another age, who must have been here a long time ago—a man in a dark suit and a woman in a white bridal dress, another man in a cap and breeches riding a horse; pictures of snow-capped mountains, gardens with fountains, faded Japanese prints. We stare at the pictures on the walls and recreate disjointed tales which the boat must have once known. Outside it is rainy, cold and sunless. The power is off, the telephone lines are dead and the world seems farther than ten miles away. There are of course, books to read, letters to write and sleep to catch up with. But why do we sense a feeling of isolation?

Don't the rains depress you?, I ask the wiry, dark sweeper who has come in with a candle sheltered under his 'pahran.' He breaks into a childlike smile. 'Rains are good for the crops. Cold is good for health.' Barefoot in the rains he walks away, washes his face and hands in the cold spring water and settles down to pray on the wet lawn. 'As usual I went for my morning walk,' says the silver-haired, silver-bearded patriarch.

'There were raindrops on my nose, my face. My feet were wet. My socks and shoes were wet. There were no birds in the trees, no dogs on the road. I threw away the rice and returned the loaf of bread to the baker on my way home. The rains will kill the flowers of the lotus.' His eyes turn briefly wistful as he looks out at the rain-filled green leaves that float on the agitated waters. But why is there no anxiety on his face? No grimness in the hollow, round eyes of the sweeper? They pray, they smoke the huqqa and go about the business of life as the rains lash their flowers, their houses, their fields and their rivers. What is it that makes these people so contained? A meal of rice and hak? An undying faith in God? 'I have a strange relationship with my God. I believe in Him and I don't believe in Him,' says Suffering Moses. 'This morning I saw a little hopper bird drenched in the rain. I brought it inside the house, warmed it and gave it food. But it died. Then I wondered about God. Why should He kill if He gives it life? But then I see other things live—despite the rains. And I know God exists.'

Return to the city. The rains continue to lash at our brick and glass houses. But we are not marooned. Sounds of living persist. Newspapers report of floods in faraway places, of vast damage to crops, of entire villages being inundated. It all seems more real now for I have known the feeling of isolation, of being marooned briefly in a houseboat of wood. The rain patters and I wonder about the sweeper who had told me that rains were good for the crops. Will he get his share of rice and hak in the coming months? And what about the silver-haired patriarch and the sad-eyed Moses? How long will they continue to accept the rains that kill their birds and flowers, as showers from heaven?

A large wooden house that looks like a godown. Two rows of men sit in front of wooden looms that look very old. They are old men, young men and young boys. They are the carpet weavers. From ten in the morning to six in the evening they sit on their haunches and weave carpets. Their heads are bent, their eyes are intensely focussed on lines of threads and their

figures are agile, nimble and move in unison. In their movement I detect a quickness, a precision, a commonplace monotony. They might as well be automatons, I tell myself, instantly dreading the comparison. But they are craftsmen, weavers of exquisite carpets, they say. Every carpet they make is unique. Every one of them carries the mark of the man who weaves. There is something desolate about these men, these craftsmen. They look as worn-out as their clothes. The old have aged, not become wiser. A number of them have beards and wear spectacles. The young look like the old. Yet they have no beards nor spectacles. Side by side they sit and weave in damp, desolate rooms, eat out of small tin boxes, smoke the huqqa as a distraction and never see the sun. When it rains and it is very cold they light small fires and huddle around them in groups. When a samovar sizzles amidst them, the dreary room acquires a brief cheer. They drink green tea and inhale the coal vapours that curl out of the fire and fill the room. For there are no windows. The soft smoke stays in. The sun stays out.

Do you enjoy your work? I ask a young man. He gazes at me with tired eyes, pulls at his huqqa and begins to think. 'It is my work,' he answers in a toneless voice. Why not any other work? 'What else can I do? I have never been to school. Seeing the market conditions I feel I am better off here than elsewhere. I at least have a job.' What else does he do apart from his job? 'I go home. By then it is dark. Sometimes I see some friends. If it is a holiday I go to the cinema.' Does he ever want to do other things? Does he ever feel frustrated, weaving carpets, going home? He is silent. Is he not aware of how that feels or has he yet to learn how to voice that feeling, I wonder. 'Sometimes when I see my friends at school I wish I too had been,' he suddenly rejoins, looking away. 'Otherwise I am okay. I don't want to leave Kashmir even if I get a job elsewhere. I always want to be here.' Yes, you are the pride of Kashmir. You make such exquisite carpets, I tell him. 'How do I know that,' he asks, gaping at me with unbelieving eyes. 'I have always been told that mine is a depressed profession.

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'When there is nothing else to do they bring us here.'

He began coming to the carpet factory with his father when he was eight years old. It happened naturally. There was no money. No school. His father made carpets. The boy went along, sat by his side and learned to knot. Day after day, year after year, he has continued to sit by his father's side, weaving. When he was a child he earned four rupees a day. Now he is seventeen and earns eight. His father has lost track of his age. But he has woven carpets for a very long time. His eyes have now dulled and his income is constant. He earns ten rupees a day, the highest that a carpet weaver aspires to earn. Their days have the same routine. Their nights, too, are not very different. Perhaps the young man dreams. The old man has stopped dreaming. For the young, life is perhaps still bearable. For the old it is probably killing.

'We are the largest exporters of carpets. And we have the largest variety. The Turkman, Cocassin, and Shiraz are still woven. Give us any other modern design and we make it.' It is the voice of the factory manager sounding superior and distant in this desolate, damp room. But what of the man who weaves, I ask him? Why does he not earn more in spite of the exports and profits? Why does his place of work look like a godown? Why does it have no windows? Why does he have no joy in his work, no pride in his skill and no sun in his life?

The snows have come and gone and it is spring in Kashmir. There are yellow masses of forsythias, vast sprinklings of white English daisies, tulips, pansies and Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah at the helm. The gardner has returned to tend his garden—so sing a row of young girls in white uniforms swaying awkwardly to the beat of a spirited group song. A taxi driver honks fiercely through the traffic of Lal Chowk. 'No copying in the examination this year, first time in twenty years,' he says excitedly. 'There is someone now the students fear and respect. I know them for I have seen them go bad for years. I have been driving this car for the university.' 'Sheikh Saheb may be good for Kashmir but he is no good for the hotel business,' mumbles a blue-eyed

waiter at the Oberoi Palace Hotel. 'The bar is almost empty these days. They are afraid of being seen here.' 'Officers are now found in offices,' chuckles a journalist. 'They turn up on time. They are all in a state of panic for they do not know when and where the axe will fall next.' A young man with a florid face joins him. 'I run a small business. Before I could do nothing without doling out a bribe—a large one for a large man, a small one for a small man. That's gone now. How long it will last, I do not know. For twenty years they have taken bribes over the table. Will they now start taking them under the table?' 'This is my garden of love,' exults a man with a bird-like voice and a long, white beard. He is old and the chinars in his garden date back to the days of Akbar. He owns seven houseboats, moored to a private garden. 'I have had a successful business. No complaints. But for the first time in twenty years I feel I am in Kashmir. I breathe again. No one commands as much love as the Sheikh. If he asks us to jump in the lake we will. We have grown with him for forty years.' In his voice I detect the fervour that one associates with new-found dreams.

Yes, they all know him—the white-haired ones with glowing eyes for forty years, and the black-haired ones with questioning eyes for lesser years. In his beginnings, they see their own. Memories go back to a not-so-distant past—rulers larger than life, palaces on hills beyond reach, closed horizons, cold poverty, colder winters, gaslight, tongas, endless trails and sitting still. He arrives then as a young man and tells them who they are. An identity emerges. He returns, a greying man, after more than twenty years, to lend that identity a meaning. And in these enormously beautiful, unreal landscapes the Sheikh, more than any other person, remains a symbol of modern times, of the new abstractions that are catching up with his people.

But out on the road to Yusmarg, a craggy, curvy road with sudden views, I encounter a man still living out a life at the edge of a sylvan landscape. Dressed in a khaki coat, a round khaki woollen cap, he gently waves a hand as we pass him by.

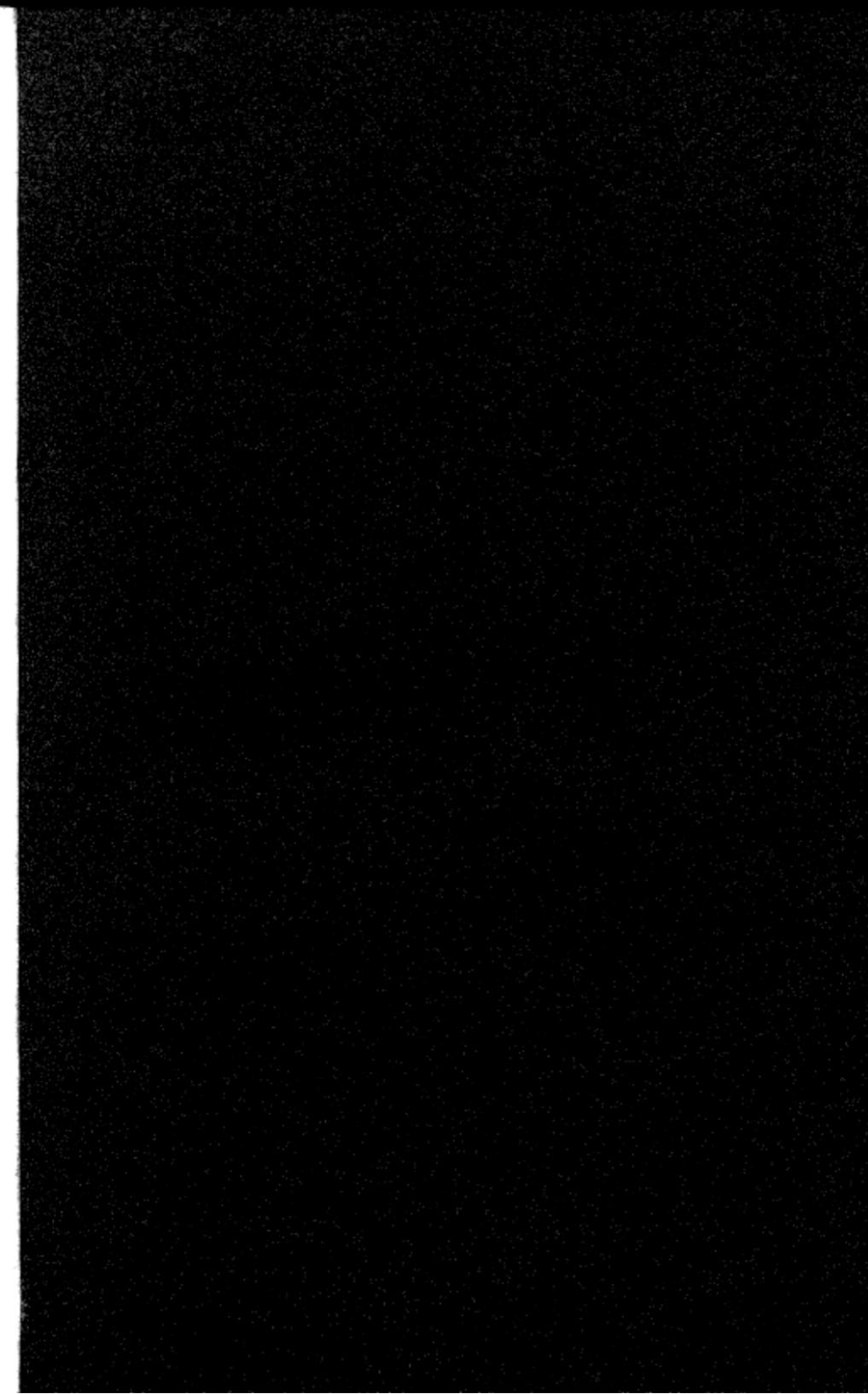
When a place becomes a person

We stop. He wants a ride to Pakharpore. We let him in. He sits slouched in the front seat gaping reverently at us. Slung over his shoulder is a khaki bag tied with string. He is a postman. He is on his way to deliver letters to a village near Pakharpore, seven miles away. Does the village get a lot of mail, I ask him. 'Yes; 100 to 150 letters every day. A number of money orders,' he stammers. How does he get there every day? 'I mostly walk. Sometimes I get a ride on a passing truck or car.' Doesn't the post office give him a transport allowance or a bicycle? 'No', he replies, confused by my question. Such things have never occurred to him. 'I get a salary of seventy-seven rupees,' he answers after a while, pulling out a yellow piece of paper from the khaki bag. It is a government form bearing his name, his address, and his salary. Can he survive on seventy-seven rupees? He gazes at us through pale, narrow eyes, the kind that mountain sheep have, and says nothing. We stop to leave him at a turning, one mile from the village. He waits for us to open the door. He does not know how to open it himself. As he stumbles out without a word, balancing his bag, I wonder about him—a humble, pale-eyed, anonymous postman who walks fourteen miles every day along this road to Yusmarg. How many years must he have walked the same road, taking letters to the same village and perhaps even to the same people? How did he preserve himself from the sameness, the boredom, the monotony? Perhaps by dreaming. Will the Sheikh's return make any difference to his dreams, his reality?

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